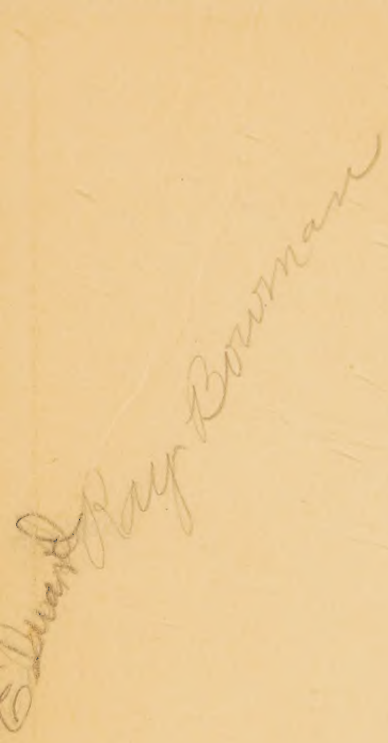
THE MAN TRAIL

HENRY OYEN



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The Man Trail

By HENRY OYEN

AUTHOR OF
"The Snow Burner," Etc.

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THE MAN-TRAIL

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING MR. JOHN PEABODY

THE whistle of the Mogul shrieked through the tamarack swamp, the brake-shoes bit, the wheels ground, and the Transcontinental Express pulled up protestingly at a tiny, unlighted shed in the wilderness.

"Dead Snake Junction," called the Pullman porter, stepping down briskly. "Um! Ooh! Dey must 'a' named dis place on a night just like dis. Wowie!"

John Peabody followed carelessly. As he stepped out he was quite ready to agree with the porter's declaration. It was December, it was midnight, it was dark and cold, and a fine powdery snow was driving like sleet under the whip of a harsh wind. John looked from the brilliantly lighted warmth and comfort of the train to the raw darkness before him and bit grimly into his cigar.

Dead Snake Junction was even less encouraging than its name. In the daytime, ringed around as it was by tamaracks and pines, the spot might have possessed some of the picturesqueness inevitable to any clearing in the North Woods. At midnight of a dark, starless Winter's night, with a north wind whistling threateningly, a bobcat yowling near by, and with the blazing lights of the Express serving to emphasize the completeness of the gloom which would prevail when the train had pulled on its way, it was a triumph of desolation.

"Yes," said John Peabody, "they must have named it on a night like this."

The porter, as he placed John's bag beside the track, shook his head for the dozenth time in wonderment over why a gentleman with money enough to tip as lavishly as this gentleman had done, should wish to—or be forced to—descend from the Express at such a place and hour.

"See dat light ovah yondeh, suh?" he asked, pointing to where a pin-prick of red light showed in the gloom. "Dat's deh tail-light of you' train. Yessuh, dat's deh kayboose of deh train what takes you up to Black Bear Lake. Dat's deh Black Bear Lake Onlimited. Ah'd tek you' bag oveh, suh, but we's goin' to rumble right now. Good luck, suh; and Ah thanks you kindly, suh! Yessuh!"

Up ahead the Mogul split the air with its mighty toot of warning. The porter sprang into the vestibule and closed the door with a slam. The drivers bit on the rails; the train moved. A few seconds later John was watching the tail-lights of the Transcontinental Express disappear in the darkness, and the yowl of the bobcat reminded him that he was very much alone.

"Whew!" he whistled. "What a cheery little place to make a new start in."

He puckered his eyes as he stared in the direction of the pin-prick of red which now alone relieved the complete darkness. He shivered. And yet, as the sharp air bit his cheeks and flowed into his lungs, he was conscious of an exhilaration which all but amounted to a thrill.

The tang of the North—the rough, boisterous North, from which weaker beings flee to softer, milder climes, and which strong men come to love and glory in, once they have felt its stinging whip—was in the air. It carried with it a sense of the freedom of vast, rough places; of the struggle for existence against the harshness of Winter, of all the challenge and invitation of the punishing, spurring North. John Peabody filled his lungs to the limit, his nostrils spreading wide.

"Whoosh!" he exclaimed as he picked up his bag. "Anyhow, this is different—considerably different from the office."

With his head bowed against the snow he warily picked his way through the dark toward the red tail-light of the caboose on the logging-train which was to bear him thirty miles northward to Black Bear Lake, the railroad point nearest to the holdings of his Uncle John, whither he was bound.

Above the red tail-light gleamed faint yellow lamp-light from the open door of the caboose, and from within came gust upon gust of bellowed song:

"Come all my brave shanty-boys; I'll sing you a so-o-ng.
If you'll pay good at-tention it won't take me lo-o-ong.
It's a little yarn of what did me be-fall,
While taking a jour-nee——"

"Hello!" The song ceased abruptly as John swung himself out of the darkness into the doorway of the caboose. "All aboo-ard! Dead Snake Limited for Squaw Crick, Split Rock, Travoy Point, Black Bear Lake, all points no-o-orth! Pullman ticket, sir? Pullman's up ahead—side-door. All aboo-ard!"

A dark little broad-shouldered man, standing spread-legged in the centre of the tiny caboose, removed his cap and bowed with mock humility as John heaved his bag into a corner.

"Sing on," said John laughing. "Don't let me interrupt. What happened to you 'while taking a jour-nee'? Go ahead! It sounded interesting."

The little broad-shouldered man replaced his cap while a grin split his face.

"Oh, ho! You've been around a little, too, I see," he said with a comical jerk of the head. "Hey, Pete—Pete! Wake up, Pete. Here's our passenger."

In the lower of the two bunks in the caboose there was a slow but mighty upheaval of blankets and a fat, short man sat up rubbing his eyes.

"Whatinell's all the noise 'bout?" he demanded sleepily.

"Passenger's aboard, Pete," snapped the little man. "Come on, get up! Show him your conductor's manners, Pete. Tell him about the time you ran the Overland out of St. Paul."

The fat man continued to rub his eyes. Gradually the sleep was rubbed from them and he sat blinking at John.

"What time is it?" he asked suddenly. "Got a watch?"

John, looking at his timepiece, said that it was twenty minutes past twelve.

"Oh, ho, hum!" The fat man rose, groaning his protests at being disturbed, and stretched himself. "Well, if that's the case we might as well be rambling."

"You run to Black Bear Lake, don't you?" asked John. "That's where I want to go."

"Yes, and that's where we want to go," interposed the little man. "And we have hopes of going there, but sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. It all depends on this line."

"Ho, hum," repeated the fat man wearily. "Well, I guess we might as well be rambling. Better tell him to go, Jimmy."

Jimmy, the little man, deftly swung himself out of the door to the side of the track.

"All right, Gus," he bawled at the darkness ahead. "Boss says you can go."

Back from the darkness came briskly, "Blamed near time," instantly followed by a tiny toot from the tiny locomotive attached to the string of flat-cars ahead of the caboose; and with a sudden jerk, which threw everything and everybody in the caboose forwards and backwards, the little train was on its creaking, swaying, jolting way.

The fat man, after having fulfilled his duties as conductor by listening for a few minutes to assure himself that the train really was in motion and that the couplings were holding, rolled comfortably back into his bunk and went promptly to sleep.

"Fine and polite for a conductor, Pete is," grinned the little brakeman, closing the door. "Goes to sleep and leaves me to entertain passengers. And yet Pete says he used to run the Overland—oh, well, it's a fine night for a murder, anyhow. Got a match?"

John had.

"Ain't got a cigar though, I'll bet?"

"You'd lose," laughed John, handing over the desired article. "What do you say if I smoke it for you, too?"

The enormous grin once more split the brakeman's countenance. As he lighted the cigar and drew in the first whiff of smoke his whole face became wrinkled in an enormous smile.

"Wow!" he said, awe-stricken, regarding the cigar. "That's a ten-center, I'll gamble."

He drew in and blew out three enormous drafts of smoke, pulled up a chair and settled himself as comfortably as the swaying caboose would permit.

"And now," he said, peering through the smoke, "why in the name of howling bobcats does any man who can smoke cigars like this want to go to Black Bear Lake this time of the year? Tain't any of my business, I know, but why?"

John laughed.

"Why, what's the matter with Black Bear Lake?"

"This cigar," said the little man, regarding that article reverently, "this cigar tells me that you're a man who travels in Pullmans, an' eats in the diner, and don't stop at nothing less'n two-dollar-a-day hotels. That's why I says, 'Why Black Bear Lake?' Ever been there?"

"Never."

"Well, the nearest thing to a two-dollar-a-day house in Bear Lake is the soft side of the floor in the ten by ten depot, and a mess of salt pork and dough-gods at a squaw-man's for two-bits a throw."

"Thanks," said John. "I'm not thinking of stopping there any longer than I can help. I'm going to John Peabody's place, which I understand is in the woods some distance beyond."

The little man instantly removed the cigar from his mouth. The look of curiosity which he had been displaying became one of bewilderment.

"Peabody!" he said. "Going to Peabody Point, eh? Worse and more of it! Black Bear Lake was bad enough, but Peabody Point, at this time of year, for a man who can smoke cigars like this—" the little man shook his head to show that he gave the problem up—"you've got me, Mister; that's something I can't understand. Pete, Pete; wake up, Pete! This fellow ain't satisfied with Black Bear Lake; he's going into the bush—to Peabody Point. Say, pardner, why don't you hit it up for the North Pole and be done with it? Ever been there?"

"Is Peabody Point a town?" asked John.

"Peabody—" the little man waved his cigar in the general direction of the flat-cars ahead—"Peabody Point is where the logs and lumber that loads those cars comes from. Peabody Point is the place where saw-logs grow on the bushes. Is Peabody Point a town? No, sir! Peabody Point is only a settlement up there in the bush that's owned and run by the Hookum Chief of this neck of the woods; and that same's old 'Wolf John' Peabody, and don't you forget it!"

"'Wolf John'," repeated young John Peabody. "Sweet little name! Why the 'Wolf'?"

"Why the 'Wolf'?" The brakeman's grin came back into its own. "Why—say, you're going up there, you say? Going on business?"

"Yes—that is, sort of business."

"Well, any sort of business at all that you do at Peabody Point you'll do with old 'Wolf John' himself; and when you're through with your business you won't have to have anybody tell you why the 'Wolf'!"

"Evidently the old gentleman is something of a character," volunteered John.

"'Character!' Holy jumping Ju-pee-ter! Hey, Pete—Pete! Wake up, Pete! This fellow calls old 'Wolf John' Peabody a 'character!' 'Character!' Oh, please, please say that to 'Wolf John's' face and watch him bite."

"Is it far from Black Bear Lake to Peabody Point?" asked John when the little man was calm again.

"'Bout thirty miles up the Big Brulé," was the reply. "There's a tote road to go up on. The logs mostly come down the Brulé. Mebbe you can hire a team to take you up. I dunno. The station agent's got a team. Sometimes he takes people out. Mebbe take you; I dunno. But 'character,' you says. Pete, Pete, did you hear that—'character'! Huh! There's politeness for you: Pete's snoring like a donkey-engine.

"Well, you better roll into Lower Six," he continued, as he indicated the bunk opposite the one in which the conductor slept blissfully. "No; no, sir-ee! Don't think you're robbing me of my berth. No, sir, I'm going to sit up and keep this see-gar company as long as it'll last. Goo' night!"

CHAPTER II

THE REASON WHY

JOHN PEABODY stretched himself carelessly on the rude bunk and gave himself up to memories of the circumstances that were sending him for the first time into the Big Woods, to an uncle whom he had never seen, and of whose characteristics he had his first intimation from the garrulous train-man. The thoughts were not pleasant. For John was being sent into the woods after he had been tried in the crucible of cities and found wanting.

"You are a failure," was his tight-lipped father's verdict. "You are worse than a failure; you are a barbarian! You are unfit to fill a place in a civilised community."

His father was Elihu Peabody, head of the genteel and conservative house of E. Peabody & Co., Bankers. A civilised community he considered as one in which men went quietly from quiet homes to quiet offices, transacted the day's business quietly—and profitably—and went quietly home; where every man had as his chief aim in life the noble object of becoming a prominent citizen—and dying rich; and—here came the rub with John—where the sons of men—of prominent citizens, that is—were quietly glad to walk in the ways of their fathers.

His ambition for John was to see him work his way quietly through the various grades to the position of head of the house of E. Peabody & Co.; to be, in time, elected to the presidency of the city's conservative Chamber of Commerce, as was the due of the head of E. Peabody &

Co. Even, in time, he had hoped to see John cultivate dignified, grey side-whiskers such as gave his own tight-lipped physiognomy distinction in bankers' conventions. And John—had been a failure!

In the bunk of the pitching caboose John admitted this to himself. He was a failure. He had fallen down on everything that he had tackled. He was twenty-six years old, old enough to have begun to do something; and he had done nothing. Worse than that, he had lost the confidence in himself which is the heritage of youth, and he had begun to accept bitterly his father's expressed opinion that he was no good.

It was not merely that he had failed so ignominiously in his father's office, though that was the final and heaviest blow. He had had plenty of other chances to show if there was anything in him. His father early had recognised his craving for out-of-doors and had treated him accordingly.

First there was that irrigation job in Wyoming. John had hailed with delight his appointment as assistant to the manager of the water-rights company, in which his father was interested, and had shot elk, bear, and cougar with great success, and in company with the small settlers of the valley in which the company operated.

He had become so friendly and popular with these settlers that when he discovered that success and dollars for the water company consisted of preventing the settlers from tapping the streams and ditches which it controlled he foolishly told the manager that a man must be a money maniac to want dollars bad enough to ruin a lot of poor farmers to get it; and a peremptory wire from his father jerked him home for his first harsh scolding.

There had been other chances, and he had failed in all of them. The place at the steel-mills had consisted mostly in keeping time on several hundred Slav labourers, with

the smell of hot slag perpetually polluting the air. With the railroad construction department his job had been storekeeper at various camps, and his books had been wofully muddled.

At last with a "Well, I suppose you are ready to settle down to usefulness," he had been brought back to the city and placed in the office of E. Peabody & Co., to be properly broken in by Babson—Babson, the pudgy, self-important, efficient Office Manager. Babson had given John a desk, a nice, new, shiny desk, and a swivel-chair and had warned John to forget for the time being that he was E. P.'s son. John, ungratefully, had stuck his big legs under the desk, had looked around at carefully combed and collared clerks, at the four confining walls of the room, and had laughed—blasphemously!

A trained observer of men, studying young John Peabody as he had lounged in that swivel-chair, would have wondered by what error he found himself before an office desk. The eyes were sufficient to tell that he did not belong. They were as yet the eyes of a boy, fresh, clean and frank; but in them the light of boy-recklessness gleamed with a brightness which suggested the man with just a little too much recklessness, too much adventure-hunger, too much eagerness to take risks, to permit him to become a comfortable, useful member of a business organisation.

Likewise, a trained observer of men would have seen that his body, even as it sprawled boyishly over the chair, was the sort of body that Nature creates when it wishes to build a body fit to withstand the sudden, strenuous physical demands incidental to an adventurous, even a reckless existence.

Babson had looked upon John's proportions as an affront to his little adding-machine gods. Babson, the self-important, at once took it upon himself to tame the brute. Twenty years' experience in one office makes for expert-

ness in petty nagging. John had smiled good-naturedly, and still good-naturedly had wondered just how long he ·d keep the lid on, how long before Babson's nagging d pester him to an explosion.

He had stood it three weeks to a day. One blustery December morning Babson, having had a bad breakfast, cast his eyes in the direction of John, seeking to find some excuse for making the big brute the object of a grouch-clearing outburst. A few seconds later, his puffy face purple with rage, he was standing beside John's desk while that young man was comfortably puffing at a villainous pipe and reading the sporting page of a newspaper! Then it had come.

"Do I have to go to your father about you? Are you such a baby that you have to fall back upon your position as your father's son? Aren't you man enough—aren't you able——"

Had Babson possessed eyes wherewith to see, he would have noted the strange flash in young Peabody's eyes. But he was blind with the blindness of twenty years of self-importance, and he went on to his doom.

"If you are no man—if you can not stand on your own feet—if you are such a baby——"

That was as far as he got. One of John's vulgarly big arms fell on him with the grip of an anaconda. Babson squealed once as the iron-like muscles gripped his pudginess. A chair overturned noisily as John arose. The office gasped.

"Harker," said Elihu Peabody in his private office to his secretary, "will you be kind enough to see what that noise means out in the office?"

Harker flew out on rubber heels. A moment later he flew back, his face horror-stricken at having beheld such a scene as he never had dreamed of beholding in all his clerkly existence.

"Well, Harker?"

"It's—it's Mr. John, Mr. Peabody," stammered Harker. "He's—he's holding Mr. Babson's head under—under the water-cooler!"

In his caboose bunk John smiled as this scene pictured itself to him. But the smile vanished when he recalled the interview with his father in the library at home the evening after this incident. There was no hint of father and son in Peabody Senior's words or expression that evening. He was dealing with a failure, a thing he abhorred.

"You may read that," he said icily, pushing across the library table a letter written in a huge, penciled scrawl. He did not look at the letter or at John.

John read:

Peabody Point, Sept. 25th.

Brother Elihu:

How are you fixed for boys? It seems I remember you wrote once you had one. I have not been lucky—or unlucky—enough to get any kids of my own. If I had a young male of my own kin—a man with man's bones in him—with me now I would not leave him a poor man when it comes my time to go, which, I am informed, may not be long away. But it would have to be a real man, one of the stiff-boned Peabody breed, not a lady-like city weakling like yourself, Elihu. Don't trouble to write to me unless by accident you have such a son—which I don't suppose you have—and he should happen to care for a man's work in a man's country.

John.

Elihu Peabody spoke at the table when John, having read, looked across at him.

"That letter is from your Uncle John, as you may be intelligent enough to surmise. Your Uncle John is little better than a savage. He takes after the paternal side of the family, probably after the Peabody who disgraced the family by being hanged for piracy. I am glad to say that the useful members of the family inherit from the maternal side.

"Twenty-five years ago he proved himself unfit to hold a place in a civilised community and went up into the woods, to live with coarse woodsmen and Indians, I suppose, and to make a miserable living at logging. You will notice that his letter is dated in September. I had no intention of replying to it until your barbaric outbreak this morning, which of course marked you as unfit for the world of civilisation.

"Ten minutes after your miserable conduct I had telegraphed to your Uncle John to find out if he still was of the mind indicated in his letter. I have just received this reply. You, of course, can expect nothing more from me. You are also, of course, at liberty to do as you please. I will say, however, that in my opinion you are comparable to your Uncle John for inefficiency, uncouthness, barbarism and failure."

The telegram which he proffered John was a single line.

Yes, let the pup come if he's man enough to get here.

John read it twice.

"All right, sir," he said, "if you don't mind, I'll start north in the morning."

And his father had bowed stiffly—had bowed out of the room. John's jaw set as he thought of it. Of what lay before him he knew nothing, but any place now was better than home.

The caboose rumbled on and on, and to and fro, its progress slow and wrought with much pain and turmoil. It crawled at snail's pace around carelessly banked curves, and it leaped clankingly over wide gaps in the rails. In time its many movements and noises blended in a soothing whole, and, despite his thoughts and the oddness of his condition, John fell asleep. He was awakened in the broad light of day by the brakeman shaking him and calling loudly:

"Black Bear Lake! For a man who smokes the kind of cigars that goes with two-dollar-a-day hotels, you certainly can make yourself to home wherever your hat drops, brother," he volunteered as John sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I was just telling the station-agent about you. Told him you wanted to go up to Peabody Point. 'All right,' he sez, 'the walkin' is fine.' " The brakeman rubbed his chin, eyeing John with a puzzled if not suspicious expression. "I guess you better go see that station-agent yourself. He says he's heard about you."

"Heard about me?" queried John sleepily. "Where from?"

"From old 'Wolf John' himself," was the insinuating reply.

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL IN THE WILDERNESS

A MORNING as dazzling and stimulating as ever dawned over the North Woods greeted John Peabody as, bag in hand, he came tumbling from the little caboose on to the station platform at Black Bear Lake.

The storm had stopped during the night. From a cloudless, breezeless sky the morning Winter sun shone rosily upon a world blanketed under six inches of dry, powdered snow. The covering of dazzling white took to itself tints from the golden sun, shooting back its days in a fashion which made John pause and blink in pain.

Out of the door of the red, box-like "depot" a bleary-eyed man poked his head, warily studied John for a moment, then hastily withdrew inside and slammed the door. Across the track from the station John made out a long log-cabin bearing an unpainted board above the door on which was scrawled in red paint, "Eeting Housse."

An Indian squaw, digging in the snow beside the door, loaded her arms with stove-wood and waddled clumsily into the cabin. A nondescript Indian dog, darting out between the squaw's legs, romped up to the track and barked furiously at the new arrival. Beyond this, Black Bear Lake displayed no more signs of life than the charred, burned-over woods about it.

John filled his lungs with the sharp air and looked about him.

Miserable and depressing Black Bear Lake was, but all about it there lay the suggestion of the large spaces, the

freedom, the big, man-thing that his nature had craved during his confinement in the office. With a smile on his lips, confident that his Uncle John had sent word to the station-agent to forward him on his way, he breezily entered the station.

"Good-morning," he said, walking up to the tiny wired-off cubby-hole in one corner of the single room. "Jimmy the brakeman tells me that my uncle, John Peabody, has sent you some word for me."

The man behind the wire screen was small and worn looking. He wore glasses over which he peered coldly at John.

"What's yer name?" he demanded testily.

John told him.

"Huh! Any relation to Mr. Peabody?"

"I'm his nephew," said John. "Hasn't he sent——"

"Yes, he has!" snarled the man with a petty creature's delight in inflicting a hurt. "He's sent word for me to look out for an impostor who's trying to pass himself off as his nephew by using his name, and he's sent word that if anybody down here helps you to get up to Peabody Point he'll come down and skin 'em alive. That's the word Mr. Peabody has sent down for you, young feller; and my advice to you is to get right back the way you come and not try to fool us folks around here. If you do, you'll find yourself climbing trees to get out of our reach. You hear me now: that's all the word I've got for you. Now you git out!"

A cannon-ball stove in the middle of the room crackled loudly in the silence that followed. John Peabody stood staring dumbly into the face of the man behind the screen.

"Did my uncle say he didn't want me to go up to Peabody Point?" he asked in amazement.

"Your uncle!" sneered the agent. "Ain't I told you we're on to you here? I've told you what he said—said

he'd skin anybody alive who helped you get up there."

"Did he say he didn't want me to come?" repeated John a little warmly.

The agent paused in his pretended business and shot out his unshaven chin.

"Ain't I told you what he said? Those were his very words! 'Phoned 'em to me and made me write 'em down and repeat 'em so I'd be sure to have 'em right. Now you better be 'long your business or I'll show you."

Into John's eyes there came a trace of the flash that had preceded the wetting of Babson, but he turned away.

"I see," he said evenly. "You've got nerve enough to talk to me that way because Mr. Peabody has told you to turn me down. All right, old man. I'll be coming back this way some time, and if I don't spank you good and hard it will be because you're not here. So long. I'll see you later."

Outside he hunted up the cheery little brakeman.

"Do you know what sort of word that agent had for me?" he asked.

"Sure," said the little man. There was a noticeable chill in his manner. "Sure, I know. And don't you think for a minute I'm going to disobey old 'Wolf John's' orders by helping you none, either. I ain't got anything ag'in you, brother, and you're certainly generous with your cigars, but what 'Wolf John' says goes in this neck of the bush, and—you'll excuse me."

"Hold on! Can't you even tell me where I can get somebody to take me up to Peabody Point?"

The brakeman debated a moment.

"Yes, I can tell you that, 'cause that won't be helping you none. The agent there, he's the only man who's got a team around here. Can't you get that? No? Thought not. Well, pardner, that's the only team of any kind for hire around here."

John looked at the white gash of a road that ran

straight northward through the burned timber, as far as the eye could see.

"Is that the road to Peabody Point?" he asked, holding out another cigar. "Go on, you can tell me that; that won't be helping me. Besides nobody's looking."

The brakeman nodded and reached for the cigar all in one second.

"Yep. Thirty miles of it. Can't miss it. And now—excuse me!"

As if afraid of volunteering any more of the forbidden information, he hurried down the track out of hearing.

John made his way across the track into the eating-house. It was a harsh reception that had been accorded him, and he was left in black doubts as to his uncle's exact attitude towards him. But his healthy young stomach, spurred by the brisk air, demanded food. Once fed he could decide what to do.

One long, oilcloth-covered table, surrounded by half a dozen chairs, completed the furniture of the eating-house. A greasy-looking white man, evidently the proprietor, motioned John into one of the chairs and bawled something unintelligible in the general direction of a rear partition.

In a short time the squaw whom John had observed in the act of digging stove-wood from the snow came out bearing in one hand a plate covered with biscuits and fried salt pork, in the other a huge tin cup of steaming coffee. It was anything but appetising fare, but his experiences had taught John that it was undoubtedly the best and only that the place afforded.

"I'm on my way to Peabody Point," he said, as he tasted his coffee. "I'm willing to pay generously to be taken out there. Do you know of anybody who has a team for hire?"

The white man, lighting a villainous cob pipe, regarded John with a look of ridicule.

"So, you're the fellow who's passing himself off as 'Wolf John's' nephew, be you?" he growled. "Well, we've got word ahead of you. No, I don't know of any team you can hire. I don't know anything. And if I'd known it was you, you'd never got a bite of vittles in this place."

John devoted himself to his unsavoury breakfast for a space.

"You're a friendly lot of people up here, aren't you?" he said pleasantly. "Is Mr. Peabody such a terrible man that you all jump when he whistles?"

The man smoked on, debating this remark. Finally he spoke.

"D'you know 'Wolf John'?"

"No."

"Ever see him?"

"No."

"When you do—" puff, puff—"if you ever do—" puff —"you'll know—" puff, puff, puff—"why you ain't going to get any help—" puff, puff—"outer me."

Having delivered himself thus, the man suddenly held out his hand.

"That'll be two bits," he said curtly.

John handed him a dollar.

"And six bits for keeping my bag until I come for it," he said.

The man stared, first at the dollar in his palm, then at the bag on the floor, then at John.

"You—ain't planning to go up to the Point anyhow, be you?" he stammered.

"I am."

"How you going?"

"I suppose I'll have to walk."

After a pause the man slipped the dollar into his pocket.

"I reckon I can keep your war-bag for you, all right,"

he said ruminatively. "Sure I can. That ain't helping you get to the Point no way 'tall."

Suddenly, as if recalling something, he picked up the bag and strode behind the rear partition.

"Remember," he called back, "I ain't helped you no way 'tall."

Left alone John finished his breakfast with no waste of time and, glad to leave the odorous eating-house, hurried out into the open air. He was sorely puzzled. What was Uncle John's idea? Had he repented of his invitation? Did he intend this harsh reception as a hint to his nephew that he wasn't wanted? Did he want to turn him back?

John stood outside the eating-house door and pondered these questions. He could see the weazened station-agent peering at him from a window. From the engine he saw Jimmy the brakeman, the fat conductor and an engineer and fireman regarding him out of the cab windows, and he had no doubt that the squaw-man, from some hiding-place, was studying him at leisure. But nobody made a move to come to him, or to so much as speak to him. Even the Indian dog, playing along the track, kept at a distance and growled tentatively.

"I am about as popular here as a leper," ruminated John, "and all thanks to my Uncle John."

He felt something warm rush into his throat as he thought of how his present condition had come about. It was his Uncle John's fault. It was all due to him. Young John's eyes gleamed suddenly with the light of boy-recklessness as he thought of it.

His Uncle John was responsible for this fix. Maybe Uncle John had done it because he didn't care to see his nephew. Maybe Uncle John would deal out a reception even more chilly than the one he had prepared at Black Bear Lake. Well, in that case he was going to have his chance before that day was over; because, young John

vowed as he buttoned up his overcoat and put on his gloves, his nephew was going up to Peabody Point to ask his uncle face to face why he had given his invited nephew such a scurvy reception.

The snow lay hard and white all over; the gash in the burned timber ran northward straight before his eyes; and the sun and air were a compound which whipped the blood around to the last red corpuscle. Thirty miles of it, Jimmy had said, and he couldn't miss it. About eight hours' walking! Young John Peabody took a long breath and set out on his way to Peabody Point at a pace that made the station-agent hope that he wasn't a man who always kept his word.

Puzzled and filled with doubts as John was, a few miles of brisk walking in the sharp air sent his naturally high spirits leaping. He kicked the dry snow high in the air, he leaped pitch-holes as he came to them, and he chuckled as he strode on. No matter what his reception would be at Peabody Point he was living to his finger-tips during this morning's walk, and he refused to let any doubts for the future spoil his enjoyment of his own perfect masculine health and the perfect morning.

Five miles out of town the burned-over timber ceased abruptly and gave way to a swamp. The tote-road ran for several miles over corduroys, then swerved from the swamp and mounted a ridge which to John, standing at the foot of it and looking up, seemed high enough and bleak enough to be the backbone of the world, and which ran northward farther than he could see.

On the level, where the snow lay evenly and tightly packed, the walking had been a pleasure. Now it was a different story. The ridge was rough and exposed to the winds from miles of marshland. In spots the ground was bare; in other places snowdrifts three and four feet high barred the way.

At twelve o'clock John threw himself down in a bare

nook and admitted that he had had plenty. Athlete that he was, the uneven going and the pace he had set had tired him. His stomach was crying for food, and so far as any signs were to be seen he was doomed to go on to Peabody Point before a meal was obtainable.

He rested half an hour and went on. A few miles farther along the road dipped down the ridge into a stretch of pine timber. With joy he soon espied a log cabin in a clearing by the roadside and hurried towards it in hope of purchasing food. The cabin door was padlocked and the place had the air of having been deserted for months.

Once more the road rose on to a bleak ridge and once more there were drifts to fight through. It was in the middle of the afternoon now and the rapidly dropping sun began to warn John that Winter days are short in the North. Since leaving Black Bear Lake in the morning he had marched steadily without seeing a single human being. A few whiskey-jacks which flew noisily from the roadway at his approach, and a snowshoe rabbit loping away into one of the swamps, were the only signs of life that had passed before his eyes.

He began to be assailed with loneliness and doubts. Was it possible that such a lonesome road could be the way to Peabody Point? Hadn't Jimmy misdirected him? Hadn't he gone astray? From what he had heard, Peabody Point was a considerable settlement. Wouldn't there be teams passing from it to Black Bear Lake? John shivered a little as mile after mile of desolation and wilderness passed beneath his feet and no signs of human habitation met his eye. Where did this eternal road lead to? Was there anything at the end of it? Or did it merely run deeper into the wilderness?

It was three in the afternoon, and John, in disgust, through having walked seven hours without knowing whither he went, and going at a pace that was little short

of a stagger, was descending the western slope of a ridge where the road once more ran down to an expanse of marsh, when, in the complete silence and loneliness, the crack of a heavy revolver struck his ears. John's heart leaped with genuine relief. Where there was revolver-shooting there must be a human being, and anybody, even the station-agent at Black Bear Lake, would have been welcome to John at that moment.

As he paused to locate the direction of the shot there came slinking from a clump of tamaracks in the marsh a long grey shape which, with its belly close to the ground, seemed to glide like a shadow across the snow.

Almost simultaneously with its appearance came another spiteful crack and the big timber-wolf with a snarl of white teeth leaped into the air, fell, snarling and spitting, into the snow, and, yowling hideously, began to drag itself away. Almost as it struck the ground from the tamaracks came four shots more, each shot following the other so swiftly that he scarcely could count them.

At the fourth shot of this volley the wolf's legs suddenly shot out taut and the animal lay still, shot through the head. There was a pushing aside of branches among the tamaracks, then out of the brush glided on long skis a figure which, in that desolation, caused John to gasp and stare!

It was a young girl, tall and slim and supple! She was dressed in a single garment of sealskin; loose trousers taking the place of a skirt; the cap made as part of the coat; and heavy moosehide moccasins laced around her ankles. Her cap was thrown carelessly back upon her neck as she emerged from the tamaracks, and as he stared John's wonder grew; for the face and head thus revealed were regally beautiful in themselves; were all the more beautiful in contrast with her rough attire. Fastened to her left wrist by a thong dragged a ski-staff, and in her gloved hands, reloading as she glided towards

the dead wolf, was a gold-plated, man's-size six-shooter.

"You got him!" cried John, exploding in relief at sight of some one. "Good shot!"

She whirled around, startled at finding herself not alone, and there was that in her lithe, swift movements which told of the strength and grace which her novel garment hid.

"Don't shoot!" he laughed, thrusting his hands in the air. "I'll come down."

And down the ridge he came, leaping boyishly, to where she stood, now entirely self-possessed. She looked at him frankly, appraising him without diffidence, measuring him from toe to eyes with a single glance; and John was conscious that her eyes were brown and wonderfully calm, and that great braids of brown hair were coiled thick upon her head. The blood was leaping in her frost-reddened cheeks, her eyes sparkled, and she smiled.

"Good shot," she said quietly. "Surely, you don't call that—six shots—good shooting?"

"I—I thought it was pretty good," stammered John in confusion., "Revolver shooting—at a running wolf—you must shoot a lot if you don't call it good shooting to make a hit at all."

The girl slipped the weapon away, out of sight in an inside holster near her belt.

"No, I never shoot at game if I can help it," she said with a remorseful glance at the wolf. "I wouldn't carry this gun, but I'm not permitted to go alone in the woods without it. I wish I hadn't had it to-day; then I wouldn't have touched this poor thing. He couldn't help what he was doing, I suppose; it's their nature to feed on rabbits. But when I saw him getting ready to leap on a pair of poor little snowshoe rabbits that were playing so happily in the brush back there I had to do something.

"I shouted, but the rabbits were bewildered and sat right up straight; and the wolf was leaping, and I had

to fire. Then after I'd wounded the poor thing I had to finish it. It seems cruel, the whole thing; but the poor little rabbits are so helpless and—cute."

John nodded gravely. He was at first amazed at having this queenly stranger speak to him so confidentially, but before she had ended her explanation quiet womanliness in her voice and words had made him feel nearly as much at ease as herself. And she was as much at home there in the wilderness as another woman might be on her carefully barbered front lawn.

"It's just a case of taking the little fellow's part," he said. "We've got to do that every time or we don't feel right afterwards."

She looked at him with real pleasure and relief in her eyes.

"I'm glad to hear some one say that," she said, still in her quiet, easy tones. "That's just what it is, isn't it? We feel that we must care for the helpless." She stopped abruptly. Her sharp eyes had noticed his shoes—heavy, capable walking-shoes on city pavements, but wofully inadequate in snow-filled woods. "Why! Aren't your feet wet and cold in those shoes?" she concluded in real concern.

As a matter of fact, John's feet had some hours ago passed into a stage of numbness in which it was impossible to tell whether they were wet or cold, warm or dry.

"I suppose they are," he said with a rueful glance at her heavy moccasins. "You see, I didn't know just what I'd find up here and I didn't come prepared for a long walk."

"You shouldn't have gone out in the snow with such light shoes," she said with a disapproving shake of her head. "You just hurry and change as soon as possible or you may have frozen toes, you know."

She spoke authoritatively, as if she were daily accus-

tomed to telling big, grown men what to do to take care of themselves. She was pulling her sealskin cap up over her crown of dark hair, and settling her feet more firmly in the ski-straps as she spoke.

"I hope to change—as soon as I get to Peabody Point —if I ever do," laughed John.

Her eyes widened.

"Are you on your way to Peabody Point?" she asked eagerly. "Are you the man Uncle John has been expecting?"

It was John's turn to open his eyes.

"Your Uncle John?" he stammered.

"Yes. My Uncle John; Mr. Peabody, you know."

"Is Mr. Peabody your uncle?" He was going to say, "too," but checked himself. "I didn't know he had a niece."

"He's not my real uncle," she said. "I just call him Uncle John."

"I guess I must be the man he's expecting," admitted John. "At least I know he's expecting me."

The girl looked at him now with mingled amazement, criticism and admiration in her look.

"Have you walked all the way from Black Bear Lake in those shoes?"

John nodded guiltily.

"Then we'd better hurry home so you can get a change right away," she said swiftly. "You follow me; I'll show you a short cut. It's five miles from here by the road, and only about two miles my way across the marsh." She glided suddenly away, then paused in confusion. "Pardon me; I'll go slow," she called back. "But you must hurry as much as you can or you'll have frozen feet."

"I can run two miles, if that's all it is," he said.

"Can you really?" she queried. "After walking all the way from the Lake?"

"Well, I was about all in a minute ago, but I feel good for it now," he said. "Go ahead; I'll try to keep up."

So, with the lithe figure of the girl gliding ahead on her skis, and with John grimly swinging his numbed feet into something resembling a run, they set out over the white, frozen marsh towards where, in the clear, quiet Winter air, there arose above the timber-line of a low-lying ridge tiny columns of blue haze, smoke from the chimneys of Peabody Point.

He was tired and cold, weary, and weak from hunger. Alone he would have staggered along dully as he had been doing for the last three miles. Now his weariness, the dragging deadness of the monotonous journey, had vanished.

The woman led, and he followed. He ran at a pace he could scarcely believe possible after his weariness. He ran eagerly, as if he feared that her light, easy gliding would carry her away from him. And as he looked again and again at the free, graceful figure before him he wished that he had not been so confounded ignorant on the subject of shoes.

He was well winded when she had zig-zagged to the top of the ridge and stood waiting for him to catch up. She stood above him and looked down. The light of the setting sun was about her like an aureole, and as she smiled he laboured up the hill and stood in the sunlight beside her.

"There it is," she said, sweeping her fur-clad arm towards the valley beyond. "That's Uncle John's—Peabody Point."

CHAPTER IV

"WOLF JOHN"

PEABODY POINT lay at the foot of the ridge like a checker-board before them. It lay on a broad, lake-like pond of a dammed river. A half-dozen large mill buildings faced the river-front. A space behind them was given up to lumber-yards.

A street, possibly two city blocks long, including shops, stores and an office building, faced the yards, and back from this street in orderly fashion were ranged twoscore small white dwelling houses, and behind all, on a knoll which overlooked every house in the settlement, was a large, low house, built in heavy bungalow style, obviously the home of the over-lord of the settlement.

Beyond the knoll, in a half moon encircling the settlement, rose a belt of majestic Norway pines, the smaller trees and underbrush cleared away, the great smooth trunks rising from the snow like the woods of some ancient, carefully tended park. Beyond this stretched the vast panorama of the Big Woods, mile after mile of green-black timber, covering all the world even unto the brass-tinted western horizon.

"By George!" cried John, and stood silent, spellbound by the scene.

"Yes; isn't it fine!" said the girl at his side.

Her outflung arm seemed to embrace it all: the hard, clean sky; the brassy sun, the black timber-line of the far-away horizon; the snow-covered pond and river; the woods; the whole great white out-of-doors. She

drew the glorious air—air as fresh and unpolluted as when the world was young—into her lungs until her figure lifted itself, buoyant, on tiptoes.

Down in the big Norways a wastrel sunset breeze set the heavy boughs to murmuring softly.

"Ah! Hear that? It makes me feel so good—so safe and at home to hear them. They seem so—Oh, reassuring."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Reassuring?" he repeated. "They sound and look rather grim and forbidding to me."

"Then you're new to the woods? That's why. Well, I suppose they are formidable unless one is at home in them. Now, we mustn't waste any more time before you get a change for your feet," she continued swiftly. "See the square white building at this end of the street? That's Uncle John's office. You'd better hurry right down there now. I'm going along the ridge towards the knoll, so I can slide down towards that big house—that's home."

"I want to thank you—thank you for showing me the way," he stammered. "I hope——"

"Oh, that's all right," she laughed as she glided away. "But do hurry and get a change; frozen toes are no fun at all."

He obeyed promptly, dropping down the ridge at a good pace, and looking back occasionally at her as she slid diagonally down the hill towards the house on the knoll. Then she disappeared from his sight, and he hurried on towards the square white office building, wondering what sort of a reception might be awaiting him. He had sensed by this time that his Uncle John must be an unusual sort of man. In what manner would he receive his nephew? A flash of recklessness came to John as he stood on the office threshold. With his jaw set he carelessly flung open the door and strode in.

Then he knew why the men at Black Bear Lake had so faithfully obeyed his Uncle John's strange orders.

An old man sat behind a large flat desk near the centre of the room. Though the room was large and fitted with other desks and office appliances, though three clerks were busy at their work, though the walls of the room were covered with mounted heads of moose, deer, bear, wolves, lynx, and bobcats, all that John saw was the old man behind the large flat desk.

He dominated the room. There was something of the proportions, the ruggedness, the permanence of the great brown pines about him. He must have been a giant in his prime. He was still a big man, but he seemed shrunken, as if recently age had too deeply tapped the life forces within him.

His hair was snow-white and as thick as the hair of a young man. The heavy, out-jutting eyebrows were white; white tufts of hair protruded from the ears. The clean-shaven face was sadly shrunken; but still huge, square, and rugged, it was the forefront of an indomitable will.

Beneath the shaggy brows gleamed a pair of small eyes so filled with fire that instantly John understood why men called this man "Wolf John." For it was his Uncle John who sat before him. He knew it the moment he opened the door. Lord and master over this domain, over all men near him in spite of his depleted powers, was written all over him.

He looked straight across the desk at the intruder, and John looked back. For many seconds they eyed each other without speaking, but in that time their wills held converse that made introductions, greetings, explanations unnecessary. Finally the old man spoke, his voice filling the room with the suddenness of heavy rifle-shots.

"Well, you're a sizable chunk of whelp-meat, anyhow!

If I didn't know and respect your mother I'd say you never sprung from Elihu. Stop it!" As John began to bridle.

"Don't bring any silly notions of propriety up here. Now, what do you want of me?" he continued, raising his voice to a querulous roar. "Don't you know *I* came up here to get away from your kind of a world? Can't you and your father leave me alone?" He had apparently forgotten his letters. "Why does Elihu have to go and send you up here after all these years? We've never played at being kin since we parted, twenty-five years ago. What do you want up here, eh?"

By this time he was leaning across the desk, his two great arms folded like bearpaws on the shiny surface. His splendid head was thrust forward menacingly, and beneath the white brows the terrible eyes were gleaming with added fire.

But also by this time John had recovered from the amazement into which the first sight of his uncle had plunged him, and the rising warmth in his throat warned him that he was growing angry. He thought of the letter his uncle had written, and grew more angry. He glared back at the fierce old man, unabashed; his big jaw set firmly, the light of boy-recklessness leaped happily into his eyes.

He paused, struggling to tone down the answer that leaped to his lips, but before he could speak his uncle had read his thoughts as plainly as if they had been put in so many words. The old man leaned back. He did not smile, his set expression only relaxed, and in the fierce eyes there was a flash of comprehension and appreciation.

"Boy," he growled, rising and throwing out his hand, "you should have been my son. Shake hands. Hah!" as John answered his bear-like grasp. "Where in the devil did you get a grip like that in a city? Sit down."

He carelessly indicated a chair at his side and reseated himself abruptly.

"Now," he continued, resuming his threatening manner, "who helped you get up here from Black Bear Lake?"

John related faithfully his experiences at the station, the refusal of assistance by agent, brakeman, and squaw-man.

"So there was nothing to do but turn back or walk out here," he concluded, "so I walked; and a few miles out I met a young girl who called you 'Uncle John,' and she took me here by a short cut."

"Belle," said the old man, boring him through with his gleaming eyes. "So you did get some help after all, Belle. Huh! Queer she should be the one to help you."

He rose suddenly, flung on a fur cap and picked up a huge, black cane. Old man though he was, and obviously unwell, he moved with a quickness and suppleness that excited John's surprise and admiration.

"Come on up to the house," he growled, stalking out of the office without so much as a look towards John or the clerks.

With long, quick strides he led the way by a raised boardwalk up the knoll to the big house overlooking the settlement. He panted heavily and occasionally pressed his hand to his left side as if in pain. The nearer they approached to the house the greater became John's amazement at beholding such a structure there in the wilderness.

The house was more like a wood's home of wealth than the home of a logging-master. Along the full length of the front was a wide veranda, the pillars being unbarked trunks of pine easily three feet in diameter. The walls likewise were builded of massive logs, unbarked but varnished, with large plate-glass windows set in at

frequent intervals. At the door the old man stopped abruptly and swung around.

"What's your name?" he growled.

"John."

"John what?"

"John Martin."

"Yes, yes; go on."

"Why, Peabody, of course."

"Yes, yes. And you are kin to me?"

"To the best of my knowledge you're my uncle," said John, puzzled.

"Well—I'm not!" the words came short and cruel. "Your name isn't Peabody. You're not my nephew. You're not going to find your way smoothed here by any plea of kinship. No. Here is your fix: you're nobody here. Your name here is—is Mud. Just Mud—Jack Mud! Remember that. You get just the same treatment as anybody else. May be a little worse. All right then; come on into the house—Mud!"

Without troubling to observe how John received this novel announcement, apparently not caring whether he followed, the old logging-king stamped into the hall which divided the house in two and flung open the door leading to a small, book-lined room on the right.

"Belle!" he bawled in an attempt at gentleness. "Oh, ho, Belle, my girl! Come a-running. Come in—Mud. Sit down—Mud."

Without looking at John he hurled his cap and cane into a corner and stood listening, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"Oh, ho, Uncle John!" came the clear voice of the girl from across the hall, and running in she threw herself into the old man's arms.

She had changed to a dark, closely-fitting dress, and John saw that despite her girlishness she was a woman grown.

"That's the ticket!" cried the old man, holding her up as if she were a tiny child so she might dutifully peck at his cheek. "Always my little Belle, aren't you?" Abruptly, and with a sudden vanishing of this display of tenderness, he set her down. "Belle Peabody, this is Mr. Mud, Mr. John Mud. You met him on the road, I understand."

"Yes, Uncle John. I was shooting at a wolf."

"Did you get him?"

"Yes."

"Did you send somebody after the scalp?"

"Yes, Uncle John; old Pierre has gone."

"That's the ticket, girl," exclaimed the old man, rubbing his hands gleefully. "Fifteen dollars bounty on wolf-scalps. Never waste anything; that's the ticket. All right, Belle," he concluded, dismissing her. "I just wanted to introduce you to Mr. Mud. You'll probably see more of him. Be sure to remember his name—John Mud. Oh, wait a minute, Belle. Have the girl lay an extra plate for dinner. He's going to eat with us, Mud is—this evening."

As she went lightly from the room old Peabody's eyes followed her with a tenderness in his gaze of which John never would have dreamed him capable.

"Come here!" commanded the old man sharply the instant the door had closed on Belle. "Look at this."

With slow fumbling movements in strong contrast to his usual swift, certain action he drew from his breast pocket a flat morocco case, much worn, and pressed the catch.

"Look at that," he said softly.

The faded photograph of a pretty young woman lay in the case. She was dressed in styles of a bygone generation, but John found himself wondering if he had not seen the photograph's original some place.

"Belle's mother," continued his uncle softly. "Should

have been my wife. Had married another man before I met her. Young fools! Both dead many years now, the man who cheated me, and—and her. I took little Belle. Her name, too—well!" With a growl as he snapped the case shut. "What are you standing there staring at me like a gawk for? Never see a woman's photograph before?"

There was no opportunity for John to reply. As well attempt conversation in the teeth of a roaring storm. Back into the inside pocket went the precious case. The old Wolf flung himself into a large easy chair before a fireplace.

"Sit down," he growled, poking viciously at the fire which had been lighted in preparation for his coming.

John meant to speak of the letter to his father, but his uncle gave him no time.

"Well, Mud," he said, swinging on John with something like a grin breaking the iron lines of his mouth, "I suppose you think you came up here on sort of a holiday, didn't you? Well, you didn't! Not any more than you came to play pampered nephew to yours truly.

"Men work up here in the Big Bush, or they don't eat. I can tell by the build of you that you like to tuck away a man's-size meal about three times a day. All right. Every man's entitled to that—if he earns 'em. If you eat 'em up here you'll earn 'em, just the same as everybody else in the woods. You'll earn 'em by using that big, thick body of yours—probably the first time it's been used for anything but play since you were born. Eat all the meals you can stow away, Mud; that's my rule—but earn every crumb of 'em."

He threw the tongs on the bricks with a clang.

"You'll go out to Main Camp to-night—" a grim, pleased twinkle showed in his eyes—"to get broken in under Bart. Oh, ho, Belle!" he bellowed in the general direction of the hallway. "Call up the office," he con-

tinued as Belle came running in. "Tell 'em to send Bull Bart here at once."

"Bart's here, Uncle John," said the girl. "He came to bring me a copper head-band that he'd bought from an old squaw near Main Camp."

The old man looked at her steadily for several seconds, his gaze questioning hers, but Belle seemed oblivious to his scrutiny.

"Shall I send him in to you?" she asked.

"Yes."

Her uncle had turned and was looking thoughtfully into the fire. John noticed that his face seemed grey and older than it had a few minutes before.

"Yes. Send him in, and tell him to bring that Indian trinket with him."

CHAPTER V

THE KING'S JACKAL

TO John, Bart did not seem to enter the room after the manner of ordinary men. There was no sound of a door opening or closing. Bart seemed to appear suddenly with his back to the closed door. So swift and silent were his movements that there was no sound to announce his coming.

At first glance John thought he was one of the finest specimens of manhood he had ever laid eyes on. Bart was John's size, but looked bigger. Close, curly black hair covered his head and a curly black moustache partly covered his mouth. The face at first glance was handsome. There was a dashing devil-may-care about its expression that at first was attractive.

On closer scrutiny, however, the favourable impression disappeared. The handsomeness of the features, the brightness of the expression, became only a mask. Behind them loomed the real man: cold, determined, cruel, sneering, ruthless. The big jaw was deeply cleft in the middle; the thin lips had a sinister curl. The eyes were set too closely together, too far up under the overhanging brow. The neck of the man obtruded itself into this second glance, thick and round, seeming to be a continuation of enormous muscles sweeping from the shoulders to the ears, and, with its suggestion of animalism, easily explaining the nickname Wolf John had given him.

Bart seemed to take in John and his uncle with one single look. He stood before the door poised as if pre-

pared to be instantly on his way again. He looked as if he were set for a leap. In his right hand was an ancient copper head-band, hammered out possibly by some Indian artist in the remote days when the Indians worked the copper mines about Lake Superior.

"I'll take that trinket, Bart," said Wolf John icily. "Belle Peabody is not accepting presents from anybody but myself. Hand it over."

For a flash the eyes of the two men met; then with a smile of great self-satisfaction, as if this incident were nothing to him, Bart placed the ornament in his employer's outstretched hand. Peabody nodded, tossed the band in a corner and said—

"When do you start for Main Camp?"

"As soon as the tote-wagon is loaded and the horses through feeding. About an hour," said Bart easily.

"Good. This man," he indicated John with a thumb thrown over his shoulder, "is going with you. His name's Mud—Jack Mud. He couldn't get along in the city, so he's going to try the woods. You're to break him in—as you see fit."

Bart nodded, looking swiftly at John as if he wished to see through him. John felt the man's gaze like a blow of a fist, but he looked back in his usual unperturbed fashion. There was instant suspicion in Bart's look, and dislike.

"Where's your turkey?" he demanded. "Your war-bag—your duds," he continued swiftly, seeing that John did not understand.

"I had to leave my bag down at Black Bear Lake," said John. "I walked out and it was too heavy to carry."

Bart threw a questioning look at his employer.

"Oh, pick him out an outfit at the wannigan, Bart," said Wolf John easily. "He can't go into any camp of mine wearing a white collar." He looked John over appraisingly, and as he noted more closely the young man's

excellent proportions his expression indicated a certain grudging admiration. "I guess that you stand about five feet ten and weigh about a hundred and eighty stripped, don't you, Mud?"

"Five feet ten and a half, and a hundred and eighty-two in condition. I'm a little overweight now."

"Hah! Bart, you hear? He's a little overweight now. Overweight isn't healthy. I'm particular about the health of my men. See that you train him down, Bart." He looked quizzically from one to the other. "That's about your height and heft, ain't it, Bart? Pick him out a complete outfit same's for yourself. And charge it against him—name of Mud, Jack Mud."

Bart nodded curtly and was gone as noiselessly and swiftly as he had come. The old man rubbed his hands.

"There's a man, Mud," he said, smiling grimly. "He was a rat when he came into the bush here. Half crazy with whisky and with the soles worn off his shoes—five years ago it was. I suppose he had broken jail some place, or was running from some sheriff. Look at him now. I made him. That's why I put him in charge of my jobs; he's something I've made myself. I worked on him a year; then he did something that showed me he was a completed job and fit to be trusted.

"It was on the drive in the Spring up at Brulé Rapids. The Chinese cook—Wah Song—was spearing fish ahead of the drive and fell in—at the head of the rapids, right in the white water. There was no chance to get to him, and the first logs were just reaching for his head when Bart picked up Wah's spear. Twenty-foot handle on it, and six long tines.

"Wah was a good cook, so Bart drove the spear through Wah's right arm and snaked him out of the white water across the butts of the first logs. Wah had to have his right arm taken off where the tines went

through, of course, but—he was left-handed and Bart knew it, and knew that I'd had trouble getting good cooks! That's how I pick men to trust, Mud."

He chuckled, then a frown swept over his brows.

"Wah Song quit cooking after that, though he didn't have to on account of his arm. I'd have kept him on. But he'd been saving money, it seems, and he went up the river to Whisky Falls and started a joint, and got a gang of hard cases around him until now they've got a regular little hell-hole up there.

"I don't like it. Too many of my men get drugged, stabbed and crippled and killed. Some time I'm going to stroll up there and give that hell-hole a baptism of fire. Yes, sir; I'm going to burn it clean to the ground and wipe 'em off the face of God's earth. If they don't get me first, that is. They're threatening right along to take a shot at me," he laughed.

"Well, that's the way I pick men to trust, Mud. That's my system. Bart can get out more logs per man than I can—now."

His eyes turned to the copper head-band which was gleaming dully in the light of the fire.

"But, —— him, good man as he is he can't come bringing Belle Peabody presents just yet. Well, come on, Mud; you've got to be ready to start in an hour, so we'll have a quick, early supper."

He led the way back to a spacious dining-room which, through a row of French windows, looked out upon the park-like grove of pines. The top branches of the giant trees were still golden with the light of the sun, but on the earth night already had fallen. To John's further amazement Belle, coming in, switched on electric lights which filled the room with a subdued glow. Belle's eyes promptly went to John's feet.

"Why—Mr. Mud!" she cried. "Haven't you changed yet?"

"I haven't had a chance," protested John. "Don't worry, I'll have a chance pretty soon."

"Very soon," corrected Wolf John with a quizzical smile. "Mr. Mud is going to start for Main Camp on the tote-team in less than an hour, and he'll have his chance to change into a man's clothes before he goes. Belle, my girl, you are not to accept any presents from anybody but me."

"All right, Uncle John," laughed the girl. The understanding between these two was complete. "But, Uncle John! Wasn't it a lovely specimen of ancient Indian work?"

"It was. So lovely that I kept it—for my own collection. Smoke up, Mud. Tuck in your meal as fast as you can. You'll have to have your outfit and be ready to start when the team's ready."

John was too nearly famished to need any further urging. During the meal not a word was spoken of his uncle's invitation to him. He learned that Belle had come home from boarding-school but a few weeks before, that Bart had managed to have many excuses for coming down to the settlement since she had arrived, and that there was only one living person to whom his uncle was anything but "Wolf John," and that was the tall, lithe girl across the table. Also, that the outlawed gang that had gathered around the one-armed Wah Song at Whisky Falls was beginning to dispute the old king's assumed right to run that part of the country.

"And that means war!" growled the old man, smiting the table. "And by the Lord Harry I'll give 'em war till there isn't one of them left in the country."

"Won't the authorities take care of them?" suggested John.

The old man growled a hearty laugh and smote his barrel of a chest.

"That's me!" he chortled. "I'm all the authority there is up in this neck of the bush. And those high-bankers up at Whisky Falls will have this authority taking care of them before they're much older.

"Time's up, Mud," he snapped, looking suddenly at the great clock which ticked slowly in one end of the room. "Get down to the wannigan—to the store—and get into your outfit. Bart'll show you. You're coming back here for Christmas dinner, Mud. That's about three weeks—if you stick that long. By that time I'll know if there's any iron in that big hulking frame of yours. If there is, Bull Bart will bring it out and see if it's easy stuff to break. Now, get away!"

John obeyed promptly. The old man's imperiousness dominated him, and though his feelings were tinged with anger and resentment, he did not hesitate.

"Good luck, Mr. Mud!" said Belle, holding out her hand. "I hope you'll learn to like our grim and forbidding woods."

"Thank you, Miss Peabody," stammered John. "Thank you—again—for showing me the way."

Wolf John looked at the pair of them.

"H'm, h'm. That's so," he muttered. "I gave orders for you to get out here without anybody's help—if you could—but I forgot little Belle. She showed you the way. Now you get down to the wannigan and Bart'll show you another."

Down in the store John found Bart waiting for him. By this time Nature had begun to send in her due-bills for the strain he had put on his body in the cruel day's march, and his muscles were stiffening. The heat of the house, and the meal he had eaten, had lulled his senses, and the magic of sleep was clamouring at his eyes, his brain, his legs, for opportunity to begin its work of recuperation.

Bart snapped orders at him and he obeyed like an automation. He sleepily signed a receipt for an armful of clothing and sleepily began to change. As he did so Bart picked up the receipt, glanced at the signature, then looked at John between narrowed lids. John, in his sleepiness, had at first forgotten his rechristening, and had signed "John Peabody," erasing the Peabody and changing it to "Mud" when he remembered.

He was quite unconscious of Bart's scrutiny. He was conscious, however, of the delight of heavy arctic socks on his numbed toes, and of the ease and comfort of lumberman's rubbers that took the place of his warped shoes. A phenomenally heavy woolen cap, a thick blue woolen shirt, red and blue checked mackinaw, and a pair of heavy mittens, and John stood up arrayed like any lumber-jack about Peabody Point.

"All right."

Bart was waiting for him as John stumbled heaviiy forth from the store. A huge sleigh, bearing tons of sacks, boxes and barrels of provisions, came slipping over the snow, the trace chains of the four horses drawing it clanking musically.

"Pile yourself up in the box there some place, Mud."

Bart seemed to spring directly from where he stood before the store entrance on to the seat beside the little old man on the driver's seat.

"All right, Nels, let 'em go."

John vaulted painfully over the high side of the sleigh-box. Fortune was unkind to him and he landed on the sharp edge of a barrel. He cried out in pain and vexation.

Neither of the two figures on the seat in front paid the slightest attention. Sleep already was laying heavy fingers on his eyes. He crawled over the boxes and barrels until he found a row of flour sacks directly behind

the seat. It was a soft spot and sheltered from the wind.

John curled up on the sacks to think things over—the trace-chains were jingling musically, the sleigh-runners whined when they struck a piece of ice. What a wonderful sort of girl that was! The jingle of the chains was soothing music. The whish of the runners was almost hypnotic. The next that John knew a heavy hand was jerking him from the sleigh and Bart's icy voice was saying:

"Wake up! What's the matter; want to sleep out all night? Come on; shake a leg. Follow me, I'll show you where you can bunk."

Less than half awake, John rolled from the sleigh and followed Bart, or rather the lantern in Bart's hand. He was conscious that they were in the woods. There was no mistaking it. The cloud-reaching pines stood like walls all about the tiny clearing in which they had stopped.

The darkness was as no darkness that John ever had seen, and a slight wind was filling the night with the mournful sough of shivering pines. He saw a rude wall of logs revealed by the dancing lantern-light, then a door.

Bart flung the door open and strode in. It was a long, low room with a double row of bunks along the walls. An odour of stale tobacco smoke and drying clothes struck John's nostrils. Silence reigned, shivered and shattered anon by variegated and unbelievable examples of snoring. He was in the bunk-room of a big logging-camp—Peabody's Main Camp—and the time was midnight.

"Here you are."

Bart slapped his hand on an empty lower bunk, swung around and went out, closing the door and leaving John standing in total darkness. But John was grateful. Here

was a place to lie down and sleep. Sleep was what his big, exhausted body craved at that moment above all things in the world.

He fumbled his way to the bunk Bart had indicated and crawled in. Being tall, and unused to the architecture of camp bunks, he naturally bumped his head against the bunk above him. One second, perhaps, he rubbed the bumped spot. And then instantly came sleep —sleep in which he dreamed a dream of his uncle and Belle struggling with a host of one-armed Chinamen, while Bart, for some strange reason, looked on and smiled. And then——

"Ro-o-o-oll-ll out! Daylight in the swamp! Roll out, lumber-jacks, ro-o-o-oll-ll *out!*"

It was morning, and Dugan, the red-haired cookee of Main Camp, lantern in hand, was standing in the doorway of the bunk-house, dodging boots and grinning at a flood of curses as he performed with impish glee his morning duty of arousing the men from bone-deep slumber to another day's hard work.

CHAPTER VI

"BREAKING IN."

JOHN lay in his bunk listening to the thud of feet on the floor as the men, grumbling and cursing, tumbled from their bunks, dressed hurriedly and slouched out into the chill morning air. He knew he must follow their example, but a few extra winks of sleep just then were precious. He fell soundly to sleep again and was rudely awakened by the jolt of his own body striking the bunk-house floor. Bart was standing over him with a lantern. There was no emotion in the man's face, though John sleepily realised that it was Bart's arm that had jerked him out upon the floor.

"Shake a leg, Mud," said Bart quietly. "You're due in the eat-house five minutes ago."

John tumbled sleepily after him out into the chill morning air. It was still dark, though in the east a sickly greying of the sky told where the day was rising.

"There's the chuck-house," snapped Bart, pointing to another long building, from the open door of which came the gleam of lights and the sounds of many men eating hurriedly. "Hop to it."

It was not John's notion of the way to begin the morning, but he dutifully entered the lamp-lighted cook-house and found himself a place at the single long table. There were perhaps eighty men seated in the room, and each and every one of them was so busily engaged in stowing away steak, potatoes, flapjacks and steaming tins of coffee that no attention was paid to the newcomer.

John's rested body now was crying for nourishment

to repair the strain of the day before, and the food was of excellent quality and cleanly served. A hearty meal and great drafts of the strong, warm coffee thoroughly awakened him and he followed the other men out into the greying darkness with a brisk step and eagerness to discover what was awaiting him.

He did not have long to wait.

"Here, you Mud, this way," came Bart's voice sharply from in front of the tiny office tacked on to one end of the cook-shack. "You'll work with Shorty here."

That was all. Bart was off with the suddenness of a cat, and presently his voice was raised in curt orders down by the stables.

John looked in amazement at the shoulders of the man whom he had been so quickly turned over to. Never had he seen such shoulders. They were so wide as to approach deformity. The man was probably a little above middle height, but his enormous breadth of shoulder and a pair of phenomenally bowed legs caused him to appear to merit well the nickname of "Shorty."

Though the morning cold was sufficient to cause John to shiver in his tightly buttoned mackinaw, the man's blue shirt was open at the top, but a golden red beard covered his throat like a mat. John looked at the small blue eyes, merry and clean as those of a boy, that gleamed out of the hairy face and liked his working partner at once.

"My name is not Shorty," said the man slowly, puffing at a short black pipe and eyeing John shrewdly. He spoke with an accent that puzzled John. "My name is Norby. You can pick up that ax and mallet and those wedges and follow me."

Throwing a long cross-cut saw across his shoulder, he led the way out of camp and into the woods. Though the camp clearing by this time was fairly light, in the thick woods, with the branches interlaced over-

head, it was still dark, and when at the end of fifteen minutes of walking they reached the spot where they were to work Norby sat down on a stump, refilled his pipe and waited for daylight to appear.

"You're too long in the back for a sawyer, Mud," he said suddenly. "Why didn't you hire out for a job on the roll-ways? You got weight enough to be a good man with a peavy. But I'll kill you sawing in two hours."

"I suppose you will," said John, "seeing that I never had hold of one of those saws in my life."

Norby slowly took the pipe from his mouth. For a while he stared at John incredulously.

"What kind of monkey business is this?" he demanded. "You hire out for a sawyer, eh? And you never had hold of a cross-cut in your life?"

"No. Not quite. I didn't hire out for any particular kind of a job. Bart knows that I am green, that I've never worked in the woods before, and that I don't know the first thing about sawing, or anything else here."

Norby put his pipe back between his teeth and puffed thoughtfully.

"Bart must have it in for you, then?" he said at last. "Why?"

"He knows that it takes a darned good, tough sawyer to stick with me. A green hand ain't got any chance. He knows you'll keel over and have to quit. Then the camp laughs at you. Have you had some words with him?"

"Absolutely not."

"Huh! That's funny. Well——" Norby looked around and saw that the dawn was driving the darkness out of the woods—"we'll see what we'll see. Bart pays me ten dollars a month more than any other sawyer in camp, so I can't lay down and give you a chance to stay with me, but we'll do the best we can."

He put away his pipe and picked up the double-bitted ax and approached a tall pine. Having decided which way the tree was to be felled, he chopped a deep notch in the falling side so quickly that it was done before John realised that the day's work had begun. Next Norby picked up the cross-cut saw and moved around to the opposite side of the tree.

"Take hold," he said, placing the teeth against the trunk. "Kick your feet well down in the snow so you won't have to bend over so much. Don't squeeze the handle like that; let her ride easy in your hand. Now, remember you just got to pull it towards you—here! You don't need to push it back, I'll tend to that. Now, pull her towards you. Here! Don't hold her back. Pull! Let her come—now you're getting the hang of it. Don't bear on her; don't try to shove it through the tree —the teeth'll eat in fast enough. Pull! Easy on her. That's right."

In spite of John's clumsiness the long, razor-like teeth of the saw ate rapidly into the white pine, throwing the sawdust in clean, sweet-smelling spurts on either side. Presently the saw stuck.

"Wedge," said Norby pointing.

John handed him one of the wedges and with the mallet Norby drove it behind the saw, and the work was on again. Presently John felt that the tree above was swaying. He looked up and nearly had his arms pulled out of the sockets for his pains. Norby kept the saw going until the tree was beginning its slow, leaning fall toward the ground. Then he quickly unscrewed his handle from the saw.

"Pull her out," he commanded. "Get over; get over there back of that spruce, you fool!" he cried as John stood still. "Want the butt of her to punch a hole through you?"

As John sought the indicated shelter the big tree came

down; a soft swish marking its course through the air and a cannon-like boom as it struck the ground. The butt jumped like a shot straight back twenty feet beyond the stump, and John instantly realised the importance of being safely to one side when a tree came down.

With his ax-handle as a measure Norby quickly notched the great trunk into proper log-lengths. The tree made four saw-logs, which meant that Norby and John ran the saw through it four times. John had thrown off his mackinaw, his shirt was open, and he was panting by the time the fourth cut was finished. And Norby, drawing out the saw, looked at him and said:

"Well, you're trying hard to learn, anyhow. You can't stick it out, though, that's the trouble."

John did not reply. He had his own doubts about his ability to stick it out; but also he had, while sweating over his first clumsy attempts as a sawyer, become obsessed by an ambition. And this ambition was to stick it out, no matter what the pain to him. For he realised that if he gave in he would have begun his stay in the woods as a failure. Bart would laugh at him; and for some strange reason the mere thought of this inspired John with a determination that he had never known before. Bart—Bull Bart—the man who had tried to present Belle Peabody with the Indian head-band, wanted to laugh at him; therefore he was not going to have the chance.

"I'll stick as long as I can, anyhow," said John quietly. "Where's our next victim?"

By the time the fifth tree had been felled and "logged up" John knew that Norby was right; he couldn't stick it out. Nature had been kind to him and given him bones, muscles and organs which placed him in a superior class physically. The life he had lived outdoors at every opportunity, camping, fishing, hunting, walking, swim-

ming, as much as he could, had builded his body up to the toughness and proportions that Nature had intended for him. A clean life had helped further.

John, as he had followed Norby into the woods that morning, was probably as perfect a physique as ever tipped the scales around a hundred and eighty pounds—and three hours later he was feeling like a hundred and eighty pounds of physical wreck. He couldn't do it, that was all. His arms were going dead; his back felt as if it were brittle. Each time that he raised himself up after bending over the saw he straightened himself tenderly, afraid that something would break if he stood up too quickly.

Nerve, grit, sand, determination had nothing to do with a matter like this. He might grit his teeth and swear that he would stick it out if it killed him, but when his pull on the saw grew weaker and weaker with each stroke, when his arms refused to take on new life in spite of his grit, he knew that Bart had reasoned well if he intended to have the laugh on him by assigning him to work with Norby.

Then suddenly a strange thing happened. The saw seemed to begin to run more easily, without the least diminishing its swift, hissing course through the logs. To John's amazement his end of the pull seemed to start of itself. He found that all that was required of him was to draw the saw on the last couple of feet of the pull toward him.

What had happened? Was his "second wind" coming back to him? He looked at Norby. Then he understood. Norby was doing a full three-quarters of the work by pushing the saw back when his own pull was completed.

"Say, Norby, what are you helping me for?" asked John as they paused for a moment before starting a fresh cut. "Don't you like Bart?"

Norby grinned slowly.

"You'll learn," he said. "You will get the knack in a day or two. Then perhaps you'll be able to hold up your end all right."

"But why are you doing it?" persisted John. "If you weren't doing about all of the work, you know I couldn't stick, and Bart would have the laugh on me. What's the idea—don't you like Bart?"

Norby measured off another log.

"Bull Bart is the best man in these woods," he said as he set the saw in place. "Jim Brackett is the best of the top-loaders, Whitey Jack is our best white-water man, and I'm the best sawyer, but Bart, he can do all of these things better than we can, and lick the other man to boot. I don't think many men like Bart—except the women," he added, laughing. "He don't care to have any men like him. He just drives men; that's Bull Bart."

"But the women?" suggested John with a strange feeling in his breast.

Norby winked shrewdly, shaking his head.

"That's another thing that Bart's best man in the woods at," he said. "He just crooks his finger at any woman he wants, and they come. Bart could have married any girl within fifty miles, if he'd wanted to. He didn't want to, though.

"Bart's too foxy. He's after money, and he looks far ahead. He knows that Wolf John is getting old and that when he goes his money and timber land will all go to his daughter, Belle. Fine young woman. Bart is the only young man she sees who's a fit match for her. No, I don't think any man in camp likes Bull Bart. He has no business calling me Shorty. Take hold there—and do the best you can."

CHAPTER VII

THE KING PINES

JOHN was quite sure that no man ever looked more eagerly to the coming of Saturday night than did he during those first strange days in Main Camp. For Saturday night, which to many of the hardened men of the camp meant the opportunity to walk six miles up to Whisky Falls to indulge in the wildest celebration, to John meant the chance to tumble into bed, to drop his fatigue-shot frame upon his bunk, secure in the knowledge that he might sleep as long as his system craved without any red-haired demon like Dugan waking him before daylight with his raucous "Ro-o-oll-ll out!"

He was tired to a degree that he never had believed possible for the human body. The test which he had undergone at one end of Norby's saw had probed him to the marrow of his bones. As he followed Norby out of the woods that Saturday evening he honestly marvelled that he was able to drag his racked body upright on his two numbed legs.

"He stuck," reported Norby to Bart as John dragged himself wearily into the cook-shack. "I pulled him till his belly's against his back-bone, but he stuck on his nerve. Give him to me for a regular partner, Bart?"

"I'll see," snapped Bart, studying John with a look that was anything but friendly. "I guess you must be failing, Shorty; he don't look as good as that to me."

John stumbled directly from the table to his bunk. The bunk-house was the scene of noise and confusion. Men were laughing and indulging in horseplay. Hoarse

snatches of song rattled the windows, and here and there the shuff-shuff-shuffle of rubbers on the floor told of some lumber-jack venting the energy which a hard day's toil seemed not to have diminished.

John neither heard nor saw. He tumbled on to his blankets with a firm conviction that never in this world was there to be obtained a pleasure comparable to the boon of dropping weary bones upon a bunk, and in five minutes he was sleeping as soundly as if the bunk-house were miles away from any disturbance or noise.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, and the sun was shining in through the open door. Peeping out of his bunk, John saw that the men all were up and had been so for a long time. Some of the men were shaving, others were lying in their bunks reading, and two poker-games were running at the farther end of the room.

"Ho ho!" greeted a voice as John's sleepy head appeared outside his bunk. "There he is, boys! He ain't dead; he was just sleeping."

"What?" demanded a second voice, assuming surprise. "You mean to say any human being could sleep like that? Nevaire! He's dead—well, by the great pike pole! If there he ain't setting up. Boys, oh, boys! Mud wasn't dead, he was just sleeping. Three cheers for Mud, champeen long-distance sleeper of the world!"

John grinned good-naturedly. He was feeling better. The long hours of perfect rest had wrought wonders. He felt for the moment the inexpressible physical contentment of the woods-worker, well fed and well slept out.

"Hip, hip, hooray!" he yawned, stretching himself luxuriously. "What time is it; about eight?"

"Eight! Oh, Mud! If you'd been hanging since eight you'd be pretty ripe by this time. It's just ten minutes

past one, and if you expect to get any scoffing before supper you'd better hit the cook-shack right away. We're sorry but the cook ain't serving breakfast to us in bed any more. Maybe though, if he thought you was real tired——"

They chaffed him unmercifully as he rolled sleepily from his bunk. John joined in the laughter as heartily as any of them, for he had the fortunate instinct to see beneath the surface of these rough boy-giants and knew the hearty, loyal camaraderie which they kept hidden by roughness and horseplay.

"What's the use of getting up at all, Mud? Why not sleep right through till Monday morning? Say, Mud, if you're ever busted all you got to do is to go to bed and sleep till something turns up. Bart ought to let him have two days off every week to get slept out in. Let's get up a sleeping contest. Fatty the cook's pretty good; let's match Mud against him for a side-bet. Fatty? Huh! What are you talking about? The best Fatty ever did was thirty-six hours at a stretch, and that was after a three-day spree. I'll bet if Mud had money on him he could go a week straight and never turn a hair."

"I'll bet you I can, too," laughed John, "if you'll give me a week's sawing with Norby to train on."

A brisk wash in a bucket of ice-cold water and he was fully awake, his blood tingling and his senses beginning to appreciate the perfection of the mild Winter day. Overhead the sky was blue and clear; underfoot the snow was soft to the touch; on the eastern side of the camp buildings water was dripping lazily from the eaves; and over the whole scene, undisturbed by sound of ax or crashing tree, lay a Sunday silence and peace incomparable.

As John stood silent, held by the spell of the silent woods, the raucous voice of Dugan the cookee came from the cook-shack door.

"Say, you, Mud; if you want any dinner you'd better come humping. We don't serve no extra meals for late sleepers, you know."

John hurried toward the cook-shack in response. As he passed by the little camp-office tacked on to one end of the cook-shack, he looked inside and saw his Uncle John and Bart engaged in scanning papers which the frail, unhealthy looking camp-clerk laid before them.

"Better hurry up and throw the chuck into you, Mud," warned Dugan, setting forth a meal. "If old Wolf John sees you eating at this time of day he may ask questions."

John ate, hurriedly and thankfully. After finishing his meal, he came out of the cook-shack and saw his Uncle John and Bart standing near the stables while old Nels, the little teamster who had driven John and Bart from Peabody Point, was hitching a team of drivers to a light, double-seated sleigh.

His uncle's sharp eyes had seen him the instant he came through the door, and suddenly he found himself the object of the old man's closest scrutiny. Had John but known it, he presented a totally different picture from that when he first entered the office down at Peabody Point. He wore "stagged" trousers—trousers cut off between the knee and ankle—a hickory shirt, thick arctic socks, heavy rubbers, and a slouchy cap. There was a five-days' growth of his heavy black beard on his face, and his big chest and shoulders filled his shirt so thoroughly that the buttons were open at the throat for comfort.

"Come here—Mud," said the old man suddenly.

John came obediently, and for another space and at shorter range those keen old eyes studied him speculatively, as if appraising him inside and out, and striving to weigh and analyse the stuff he was made of.

"How d'you like it so far, Mud?" shot out Wolf John.

John looked back at the fierce eyes without faltering.

"All right," he said.

A tiny smile flickered in one corner of his uncle's mouth.

"Bart tells me you've been pulling saw with Norby," he said quizzically. "Did he—umm—teach you anything about—umm—logging?"

"Yes, sir," said John.

"And you—umm—still think it's better than office work in the city?"

"Yes, sir."

"Shorty's failing," put in Bart. "I guess he must be getting old."

Wolf John turned upon his foreman with a questioning look.

"Didn't he hold up to his mark while Mud was with him?"

"Oh, they made logs enough," said Bart. "But they must have had easy timber to do it, because no clumsy greenhorn with white, soft hands like Mud here could hold a cross-cut with Shorty if he was at his best."

"Let's see your hands, Mud," snapped Wolf John sharply. The trace of a smile again appeared on his face as he beheld the raw spots and callouses on John's palms and fingers. "Your hands wouldn't get mussed up like that doing office work, Mud," he suggested. "And that's just a starter to what the woods will do to you."

"Yes, so I've been told," said John dryly.

"And you still think you want to try to stick here?"

"Yes, sir."

The little teamster came driving up with the sleigh. Bart and Wolf John stepped into the rear seat.

"Get in, Mud," commanded the old man.

As John clambered obediently in beside the driver, Bart turned upon his employer a look which asked plainly, "Why's he coming with us?" And the look which Wolf John returned him said, "None of your business" so plainly that Bart turned his head away, angered and puzzled.

To John's surprise, Nels turned the horses' heads away from the tote-road and drove slowly out upon the little, brushed-out road which ran straight northward from camp. The logging roads were to the south and east of camp, and, though he had never been in this direction, John was under the impression that to the north of the camp lay nothing but a wilderness with foot-trails. As he stepped into the sleigh he had bumped against a big rifle nestling close to Nels' side, but as Nels, who was the camp meat-hunter when not acting as tote-teamster, seldom went anywhere without his rifle, there was nothing remarkable in that.

John did not waste much time puzzling over where they were going or why. The blue sky and sun above his head; the carpet of snow all over the world; the whipping, tingling Winter air in his blood and lungs; and overhead the gentle, lazy whisper of the pines as they swayed in gentle, lazy breeze. Miles away a hound gave tongue; a whisky-jack, flying across the road, shrieked shrilly; red-squirrels scolded volubly as the sleigh went by; and up above, sole occupant of the Winter heavens, circled a huge hawk in the eye of the sun.

An exclamation of delight broke from John's lips. Old Nels looked at him curiously.

"You like it?" he asked.

"You bet. Don't you?"

"I'd rather be here than have a million dollars," said the old man. "Giddap!"

Two miles or so from camp the little road ended

abruptly at the edge of a frozen marsh. For three or four miles the level white expanse stretched before them, broken here and there by an island of alders or willows. So clear was the air that John could make out on the farther side of the marsh what appeared to be a solid, bluish wall.

"What's that?" he asked of Nels, as the sleigh slipped out upon the marsh.

"That's where we're going," was the reply. "That's the King Pines."

Half an hour of steady driving over the untracked swamp and the bluish wall had become distinguishable as a mass of trees. As the sleigh drew nearer and nearer, and the proportions of the trees became apparent, John gave vent to an exclamation of awe and surprise. He had thought some of the largest trees about Main Camp large in size, but the smallest tree of the forest before him was colossal in comparison.

Straight and clean the King Pines stood, each trunk bare for a hundred feet from the ground, without a trace of underbrush about them. Above, a hundred and fifty feet from the ground, their branches met and interlaced, forming a canopy which shut the sunlight out and created the bluish darkness which John had espied from a distance. So clean was the ground beneath from brush and smaller trees that Nels drove into the woods as easily as he had driven over the marsh.

"Fit stuff to fight for, Bart," said Wolf John, eyeing the forest giants about them with expert appreciation. "The logging-man who'd see this bunch and not try to get it wouldn't be worth his salt!"

Bart nodded.

"You'll be a hundred thousand dollars richer when we get this bunch back of the booms," he said.

"Just about," agreed Wolf John. "Whoa! Pull up,

Nels; let's look around. Yes, here's the trees we blazed last Summer."

They alighted on a flat bit of high ground where half a dozen of the big trees were girdled with ax slashes.

"Yes, this is the place we picked for camp, Bart," said the old man, stamping energetically around. "It's the place; looks just as good now as it did last Summer. Put the bunk-house there; cook-shack here, stable over there. Run your main road straight east and west to the river, and cross it with two smaller roads—one here and one higher up, and there's your lay-out.

"Log the stuff that's farthest away while the roads are frozen hardest, and work down toward the river as the soft weather comes. Yes; we ought—hello; what's that, Mud? What's that board doing on that tree?"

He came rushing over to where John was reading the marking on a piece of board tacked firmly to the trunk of a tree.

MR. PEABODY:

Don't try to log these woods. Your lease is no good. You can not rob the poor Indians. They have powerful friends. You will be shot the day you drop the first pine in these woods.

THE TRIBE.

"The Tribe!" bellowed Wolf John mockingly. "Oh, the lying devils! The dirty, sneaking, cowardly combine! The high-banker, Trust robbers! Now they're working through the tribe. They tried to buy my lease first. Then they insisted I turn it over to them on a percentage basis. Then they threatened they'd shut the market to me. Then that the Government would interfere. And now when I've called every bluff they've made, and showed that even if they are the Trust they've got to have real cards to beat John Peabody, they work through those poor Chippewas and threaten my life!"

In his fury he tore the board from the tree and broke it to pieces in his bare hands.

"Damn you, Jim Lowrey!" he cried, uttering the name of the multi-millionaire head of the lumber trust.

He hurled the broken bits of board into the snow and stamped on them as if they represented his enemy.

"This is his work, this is his sneaking way. The same as when we were river-pigs, running the old Big Wolf, back in Wisconsin. He shot a man from behind a stump back there; and his damn trust has been shooting in the back every logger with guts enough to buck it ever since it was started. Threaten me! Scare me!"

He raged up and down between the pines, his cap off, his head of white hair tossing.

"The Tribe! And I've got the mark of every one of 'em on the contract, and took me ten years to do it. Bart!" he said quietly, suddenly stopping his pacing, "I'll bet a team they've tried to get next to you."

Bart laughed easily.

"I wouldn't tell you if they had," he said. "But if they had, and had made it look better to me than staying with you, I wouldn't be here, you can bet two teams on that."

Wolf John nodded.

"Good talk, Bart. No drivel or sentiment about loyalty or friendship. Just business; that's the talk. Ugh!" He clutched suddenly at his left side and leaned weakly against the tree, trembling and panting.

Bart looked away, and again it seemed to John that he smiled as he had done that first day in the Peabody home, a smile that seemed to tell of a secret and a power which he possessed and which Wolf John never dreamed of. The cruelty and ruthlessness that gleamed for a flash in the averted eyes told that this man would stop at nothing, not even murder, to achieve his ends.

"Just business," he said. "The same as your reason for paying me more than any man on your pay-roll."

"Right," snapped Wolf John, recovering himself. He swung suddenly on John. "Well, Mud, what do you think of the woods now? You see there are other things to the logging game besides pulling a saw."

"I think that sign was a fool bluff," said John, while Bart looked on, suspicious and vexed that old Peabody should pay so much attention to this greenhorn. "There's bluff written all over it."

Wolf John was serious as they climbed back into the sleigh.

"Bluff?" he repeated doubtfully. "I dunno. The sign was put up by some one of that gang up at Whisky Falls who's in the Trust's pay, and there's men up there who'd as soon put a bullet through a man as Nels here would through a buck. Well, shooting's fair enough, too, because there's always a chance that I'll get in the first shot instead of them."

"Or that old Betsy here'll get it," said Nels, patting his 45-90.

Wolf John laughed grimly.

"Or you might send Mud after 'em," said Bart quietly, "since he knows so much about bluffs and so on."

Wolf John looked at his foreman sharply. But Bull Bart was smiling easily, and apparently his remark had been made without any forethought or seriousness whatsoever. The old man opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. His face once more turned grey and again he clutched at his left side, as if in a spasm of pain.

"Indigestion, that's all," he muttered as the team stopped. "It's nothing, drive on."

John happened to glance back at Bart at that moment. The foreman was studying his employer's pain-grey face with something suspiciously like satisfaction in his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

WHY BART SMILED

THAT night John heard the explanation of the drive into the King Pines. Nels, the old tote-teamster, and Norby, both Norwegians, were cronies. In the evening after Bart had driven away on his regular Sunday night visit to Peabody Point, Norby, whom John had been trying to pump, led the way to Nels' little bunk-room in the stablemen's quarters.

"How about it, Nels?" questioned Norby. "Do we go into the King Pines when we're through here?"

Nels, who was plaiting a whip-lash, nodded curtly.

"Yes; there ain't any doubt of it now," he said. "They've gone so far as to try to scare Wolf John out, and you know what that means. Yes, we'll log that strip this Winter if there has to be more dead men up there than logs."

"What is the fight about, anyhow?" asked John. "Do they pretend that Mr. Peabody hasn't a right to that timber?"

"Well, it's kind of a mix-up," replied Nels, putting down the whip. "Wolf John's got a fair and square lease on the timber, all right, no doubt about that. It's on Indian land, you know, but the old man cruised it himself. They didn't anybody know what was up there till Wolf John went through it.

"He kept it secret, too, you bet. I knew, because he took me up there once, and I suppose Bart knew, because he knows all about the old man's affairs; but outside

of that there wasn't anybody, so to speak, who knew the first thing about it. Indians don't count; they can't tell the difference between good solid stuff and a woods full of shaky butts.

"It was about ten years ago that the old man cruised it, and it was only this Summer that he finally got a lease, and his lease is only for one year at that. Well, in some way the Trust had got wind of what the King Pines was like, and Lowrey was crazy to get it, because of a beating Wolf John gave him when they were young men, years ago.

"So the Trust hurried up and offered the Chippewas' agents a lot of money, and the agents took the money and gave 'em a lease. And then they found that Wolf John had the Indians signed up through the Gov'ment just a few days before! Well, the Trust wants to keep him from logging it this year, and those fellows, they never let a little thing like killing a man or two stop them when there's a chance to get a few million feet of timber."

"I wonder why Bart didn't go with Lowrey," put in Norby. "It was common talk that they offered him a percentage if he could keep Wolf John from logging the Pines this Winter. They say he was dickering with 'em last Summer, and then all of a sudden he broke it off. Wonder why he did that?"

Old Nels took out a black plug, carefully cut off a chew, put knife and tobacco back into his pocket, and looked at the floor.

"Belle Peabody came back from school," he said slowly. "The old man sent Bart down to Black Bear Lake to drive her up to the Point. Bart didn't do no more dickering with Lowrey and that crowd after that."

There was a long silence. John wished to ask a multitude of questions, but a sudden sensitiveness tied his tongue.

"Well," said Norby, after a long silence, "he hasn't broke with Wah Song and that gang up at Whisky Falls, and they're Lowrey's people. There's women up there, and you know Bart."

Nels nodded and spat loudly.

"When Bart saved Wah Song's life that time in the Rapids, Wah Song he swore some kind of a Chinese oath that he'd do anything Bart wanted him to do—anything! Well, soon after that Wah Song had that place going up there at the Falls—right beyond the King Pines, and pretty soon after that they was Lowrey's people.

"I don't know anything for sure about it, but you can see what a help that gang and their whisky and women would be to cripple Wolf John's crews and keep him from getting that timber down this Winter—supposing if Bart had quit him and helped bother him. But—after she—Belle Peabody—came back from school, Bart didn't have any more time for that Lowrey bunch, as I've said. Of course he ain't broke with Wah Song. Bart doesn't burn any bridges even when he feels sure there's nothing but easy logging in front of him. Wah Song might come in handy, and then there's women up there, as you say, Norby."

Norby smoked reflectively, rocking to and fro.

"Whisky Falls will have to go before we start logging up there, Nels," he said. "They're too close. Bart knows too much about lumber-jacks to think he could keep a crew on the job with whisky and the rest of those things so near."

"They'll have to go," agreed Nels.

"They won't go just for any man telling 'em to."

"They won't go till they're shot out," said Nels, a sudden light flaring in his old eyes. "Unless Bart should have things fixed so safe for himself that he could afford to get along without Wah Song. Then he could tell Wah Song to get to hell out of the bush and

take his gang with him—and Wah Song'd do it, too, for Bart."

There was another long silence, then John spoke for the first time.

"What do you mean by Bart having things fixed safe for himself?" he asked, trying to make his question appear casual. Norby and Nels looked at him together.

"That means if he was married to Belle Peabody, or going to marry her," explained Norby.

John, doing his best to appear utterly unconcerned, thought of how his Uncle John had refused to allow Bart to make Belle a present of the Indian head-band.

"How about Wolf John? What would he have to say to that?" he asked.

"Huh!" Old Nels shook his head, chuckling. "I don't think the old man would like it; but he thinks so much of that girl that if she wanted to marry Bart he wouldn't say a word—and he knows all about Bart at that."

"Yes," said Norby, "and Bart knows that, too. He's foxy and strong, Bull Bart is. He didn't turn down Lowrey until he knew he had easier and better logging in plain sight."

John went to his bunk that night with a heavy heart. The more he heard of Bart the harder it became to hear his name spoken in connection with Belle's. He thought of her as he had seen her that first afternoon, glorious in her beauty, her tender strength, her magnificent young womanhood.

John had never been a ladies' man. Women to him had always belonged to the caged and befrilled part of the world from which he had so eagerly yearned to escape. But as he lay sleepless in his bunk that night with the memory of Belle's deep eyes before him, the thought of Bart was like the thought of something malignant and foul.

Were Norby and Nels right? It didn't seem possible!

Yet John already knew them both for a breed of men who were painfully careful not to speak unless they knew what they were talking about. And without understanding why, he lay and tortured himself far into the night with the thought that Bart even then was in Peabody Point, the home of Belle.

CHAPTER IX

BIG CHARLEY

AFTER breakfast next morning, Bart came up to John as he was preparing to go with Norby into the woods and said—

"Here, you, Mud; you'll work with Big Charley to-day."

A scowling, red-faced giant standing near by grunted derisively.

"Mud! Ho! Dat's fonny name. Mud! Ho! Aye tenk mebbe his name be Dennis baffore night ef he go'n' pull saw widt me."

John looked his new working-partner over. The man must have stood six feet six in his rubbers. His arms, with hands unnaturally large, hung from his shoulders like the thick branches of some huge tree. A straggling yellow moustache hid a sneering mouth, little greenish pig-eyes gleamed bloodshot from the puffy face; and his breath, poisonous with bad whisky, eloquently explained the puffiness.

"Come on, yew little Mud faller," he snarled, glaring maliciously at John. "I ain't feel so well diss morning. I pull your arms out of deh socket."

The next five hours were a nightmare to John. Before fifteen minutes had gone by he realised that Big Charley was suffering from the effects of a visit to Whisky Falls, and that he was working off his grouch on his new partner. There was no way in which the giant did not force John to betray his inexperience, no possible

fashion in which he did not seek to make John cry enough.

At first John laid it all to the man's liquor sickness, but as the morning wore on he began to sense that there was a definite purpose behind Big Charley's words and actions. It was only after he had leaped luckily away from the spot where Charley had told him to stand, and avoided the downward plunge of a falling limb, and had dodged a wedge which the giant had carelessly tossed at his head, that he understood. Big Charley was out to get him hurt. Apparently it didn't make any difference how it was done, or how serious the damage. In his pretended rush-work Big Charley was taking every opportunity that might appear accidental to send John back to camp broken or crippled.

John said nothing. For the rest of the morning he kept himself alert, and Big Charley's efforts all went in vain. By noon he knew that it would be impossible for him to continue as Charley's partner, and as he followed the sullen giant toward camp for the noon meal he debated with himself the course to pursue. He could not go to Bart and complain; Bart would have him laughed out of camp. If he refused to work with Charley, something of the same sort undoubtedly would happen. In either event Bart would have marked him as a weakling and failure.

On the other hand, if he stuck it out Big Charley inevitably would find an opportunity when John was off his guard to do him the desired damage. He was still pondering when a voice hailed him from behind a stump near the camp clearing and old Nels, the tote-teamster, was beckoning to him slyly.

"How'd you make it?" asked the little man anxiously.

John told him of his experiences of the morning.

"Sure. You got to look out for him; he's a bad one. He'll put you on the bum if he can. I tried to tell you

this morning when you started out, but I didn't have the chance."

John looked at the old man gratefully. Small, almost gnome-like, Nels was of body, but in his mild blue eyes gleamed the light of a big spirit.

"What can I do about it?" begged John. "I can't quit him. I can't kick. What can I do?"

The old blue eyes ran over John's frame, over his jaw, and up to his eyes appraisingly.

"How are you with your mitts?" said Nels suddenly.

"What?"

"And your nerve? Got any backbone?"

"What are you driving at, Nels?"

"I'm just dropping a hint, boy," said Nels. "It's for you to take it up, if you got the nerve. Big Charley's so big that he's got the whole camp bluffed; they're afraid to talk cross to him. Well, I saw the time when Bart tamed him. A square fist-fight alone in the woods. Charley's wind's gone—gone completely. Bart jumped him hard at the go-off and put him down. Then he stayed away from him a few minutes and let Charley wind himself; and after that he walked in an' Charley wasn't any harder to handle than a sack of oats. Just a hint; you do what you please about it. There he is now; he's waiting to show you up before the whole camp. That's his way."

They were in the camp clearing now, and Big Charley stood in front of a group of men before the bunkhouse. As John came within hearing he roared derisively:

"Boyss, dere's deh poorest excuse for a man vot ever come into diss camp. He aindt got backbone 'nough for a baby. He yumps when a limb falls widdin ten rod of him. He's a high-banker, he iss."

It was the camp bully's usual way of humiliating a man, and the men stopped and grinned expectantly. The retort came with a swiftness that surprised them all.

John had gauged the distance and leaped forward as the last words left Charley's lips.

His arms caught the long legs at the knee in a perfect low tackle. Charley fell like a tree, and before he could rise, cursing and roaring, to his feet, John was free and standing alert and ready for battle.

Big Charley rushed. John side-stepped. The giant rushed again. John repeated his tactics. After five minutes of this Big Charley began to pant. John began to breathe easily again, for he saw that the man already was whipped.

When chance offered he stepped in with his weight behind a blow to the solar plexus. Big Charley sank to his knees, his face white, his hands pressed to his middle.

The men, at first amazed, were now roaring with laughter. Never had a camp bully made such a miserable showing. Suddenly the men began to scatter. Out of the little office at one end of the bunk-house Bart came springing with set jaw and flashing eyes. He went straight to Charley. The big man was staggering to his feet. With a blow to the jaw Bart stretched him on the ground and kicked him dispassionately.

"Come and get your time when you're able," he said calmly. "Your bluff has been called, so you're through. The men know now that you're nothing but a bum." He turned on John. "Come into the office, Mud; I want to see you."

In the office John saw a sickly looking youth sitting on the floor in one corner, weeping piteously. The youth had a black eye, and his lips were cut and swollen. At the sight of him Bart paused and cursed venomously for a full minute.

"That was my clerk," he explained to John. "Hired him last week, and here what does he do but fall sick with typhoid fever and have to go away. Ahh! If I wasn't busy I'd bat the head right off his shoulders in-

stead of barely marking him. You're going to take his place, Mud. You're no good with the saw. Go and get your dinner. Then come back here and this poor louse will break you in."

He strode to the door, stopped, and turned around.

"I suppose you think that you're fairly handy with your fists, Mud. Well, I do all the fist-slinging that's done in this camp. Remember that."

During that afternoon, as he took up the simple duties of the little office, John alternately laughed and grumbled.

"Fate's against me!" he ruminated, as he saw the fever-stricken clerk driven back to Peabody Point and knew that he was left in sole charge of the camp's clerical work. "I got shipped from the city because I couldn't stand the office, and here I'm dumped into one—in the woods! And Bart beat up that poor, sick kid! Now I wonder if Bart is going to be worse than Babson?"

In the next few days he discovered that Bart had little time to spend in the office. The man was driving-power incarnate. In the first greying of dawn the teamsters, tumbling sleepily out to feed their horses, found him standing at the stable door, his pale, malignant face reminding them of what might happen if they were late. At midnight the tote-teamster, coming to camp with a load of provisions, found Bart waiting to demand news from his superior, Wolf John. During the daytime he was everywhere, saying little, his mere presence serving to keep the men keyed up to the highest tension.

"And when he sleeps Heaven only knows," said Nels, the old tote-teamster, who had become friendly with John. "There are some that says most every night he walks six miles up to Whisky Falls and back when the camp is asleep. There's women up there; he is a devil with women."

CHAPTER X

THE CODE OF THE WOODS

FROM that day John went about his duties with new seriousness and care. He had come into contact with the great game for power, wealth and women as strong men play it when they are beyond the haltering bounds of law, and he saw that in such a game no thoughtless, larking boy might take a hand. As he had determined to play, he resolved to play to the best of his ability, and as he recognised his vast inexperience in such a game he humbly set himself to learn as rapidly as he could.

To get near to Bart, to understand the man's character, to win his confidence if possible, seemed to John the best road to learning what part he should play in the big game. He had seen enough of the man to appreciate that to accomplish successfully the first step in this process he must, above all, perform efficiently and faithfully the distasteful clerical work assigned to him. Hence it would have delighted his father to behold the humble, conscientious manner in which John proceeded to fulfil his post as clerk to Main Camp.

The work in itself was simple and light; but the previous clerk, probably in the days when the fever was beginning to trouble him, had succeeded in involving his accounts in a most unbusinesslike tangle. This tangle John set himself to clear up, at the same time keeping each day's work up to the minute. For several days he worked far into the night, the light in the little office

gleaming out upon the snow long after the rest of the camp was abed.

Bart seldom appeared in the office, and then only for a few seconds at a time, but John knew that his night work was not going unobserved. On the fifth night after taking over the office the tangle was cleared up and John, sitting down to light his pipe and regard his completed work with considerable satisfaction, looked up and saw the silent-footed Bart standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing—plugging for a raise?" asked the foreman suspiciously.

John shook his head.

"No; but I don't like to work with poor tools," he replied. "Things were pretty well balled up here; I've been straightening them out. Look at this."

With a zeal that was as much genuine as it was assumed he proceeded to demonstrate the changes which he had wrought in the camp's system of accounts. Bart, looking on carelessly, asked half a dozen short questions, each one of which went straight to the heart of the matter in hand.

"You're a good clerk, Mud," he said with a trace of contempt in his tone when the explanation was finished.

He picked up a ledger and stood studying the rows of accounts and figures in John's neat handwriting. Suddenly he chucked the book away, turned around and flung himself into a chair.

"I s'pose you think you're through with Big Charley, eh, Mud? Well, you ain't. He's up at Whisky Falls, and he sends word if you ever show up there he'll tear you to pieces. Says he knows you're afraid to come up there, though. Well, I guess he's right, ain't he, Mud? You know you were lucky in getting away with him when he was under the weather; you're too wise to risk

yourself in tough company away from camp, ain't you, Mud? You bet. *Mud!* Ha, ha!"

With a sneer which cut John to the quick, he swung silently out of the door and was gone. No crunch-crunch of his rubbers on the snow came back from the silence of the night. The man moved like a wildcat, as silently as he moved swiftly.

John sat and smoked alone for a long time before he went to bed that night. Nels, the old teamster, was partly right at least: Bart certainly was the sort of man who would do anything to further his own advantage. But why had he taunted John with Big Charley's boast from Whisky Falls? Was this part of the process by which Bart was to discover whether there was any "iron" in him, as his uncle had put it? Did Bart want him to go to Whisky Falls? Or was it merely said to make him feel small?

Next morning, while John was checking up a load of provisions for the kitchen, he overheard his name spoken by the fat cook in conversation with the cookee. The men spoke with unnecessary loudness, obviously for his benefit.

"Naw," said the cook contemptuously, "he ain't no man; he's only fit to keep books and hug the stove. He don't travel with the he-men, that Mud don't."

"But he cleaned up the Big Swede, didn't he?" came the young cookee's suggestion.

"Ah, cleaned him up!" The cook laughed. "Didn't you see what Charley was playing for? To make the guy think he had a cinch. Then Charley was going to clean him right; but Bart seen it and comes running out and stopped it. Big Charley sends word from the Falls that he's laying for this Mud, but there ain't no danger Mud showing up there. Somebody'll give him the news that Big Charley's staying there and he'll keep away, see'f

he don't. Naw, that big stiff's nothing but a bookkeeper, he is. He ain't no man 'tall."

Later in the day, Lavin, the old stableman, coming into the office for a requisition for feed, smiled at John significantly.

"Ain't going up to Whisky Falls Sat'day night, I s'pose, be you, young fellow?" he asked.

John replied that he hadn't thought of going.

The stableman laughed.

"No, I guess not. You won't be going up to the Falls so long as Big Charley's hanging 'round there, I'll bet on that."

He went out laughing, leaving John more deeply puzzled.

At the evening meal the taunting continued.

One lumber-jack called across the long table to another.

"Hey, Pete, you goin' to Whisky Falls this Sat'day?"

The man addressed instantly simulated great fright.

"I should say not," he stammered. "Big Charley's up there. I'm afraid to go away from camp and get hurt."

The table roared with laughter and John's wonderment grew. After supper he sought out old Nels for an explanation. The old man nodded as John related all that had been said by Bart and others about Big Charley.

"Bart dropped a hint that set the boys up to it," he said. "It's camp sport; seeing how much you will take. Big Charley is up there, too."

"But there's no sense to it," John protested. "Surely Bart doesn't want me to go to Whisky Falls to fight that poor soak again?"

Nels rubbed his chin slowly.

"It's this way," he explained. "You're a new man in the bush and they're trying you out. That little fuss before the cook-house, you know; well, that showed you wanted to be classed as a fighting man, and the boys are

trying to find out if you are the real thing. If you'd took Big Charley's lip and said nothing you wouldn't have been bothered. Then you'd have showed you didn't want to be thought of as a fighting man. But now you got to show 'em or they'll make life miserable for you."

"You don't mean I'll have to go up there and get into another row with that sot?"

Nels looked up, his eyes puckering suspiciously.

"You ain't afraid, are you? If you are——"

"Afraid!" cried John. "Is that what they want to know? All right. I'll show 'em."

"It's best," said Nels seriously. "I'll go with you. If you didn't go you wouldn't have any standing with the boys, you know, and then when the pinch comes you wouldn't be in any fix to do much to help Wolf John."

A week before John would have laughed at the whole affair. But now he understood that in the woods standards differ from those in the city. If he refused to go to Whisky Falls he would be pointed out as a thing to condemn, a man afraid. It was a test, and, silly as it was, he knew he must meet it if he was to make good.

When Saturday came the men knocked off work at 3:30, an hour before their usual quitting time, which was when the short December day ended abruptly in darkness. More than forty of them as they came into camp made their way directly to the office. John sat at the desk, a check-book before him, pen in hand. Bart sat at his side. As each man entered, the foreman spoke sharply—

"How much?"

The man addressed invariably cleared his throat and shuffled nervously.

"If you could do it, Mr. Bart, I'd like to draw about ten dollars."

"Give it to him, Mud."

Some of them boldly asked for as much as twenty, knowing that they had much more than that due them.

"Give him ten," snapped Bart, and the wealthy ones accepted the reduction humbly. "Ten is plenty whisky money for any man."

When the last man had drawn his check Bart turned to John. "Going with the crew to-night, Mud?"

"Where are they going?"

Bart sneered.

"You are green, Mud. What do you s'pose lumberjacks draw money for—to go to church with? Those fools are going up to Whisky Falls to shoot in their money, but seeing as Big Charley is still up there you'd better stick to camp and play dominoes with cookee."

"Perhaps," laughed John, "but as I've decided to go up to Whisky Falls and see my friend Charley, cookee will have to find somebody else to play with."

A cutter and single horse came driving up to the office door and Bart stepped in and took the reins.

"I'd like to go up and see that you don't get too badly hurt to keep books, Mud," he laughed as he started off. "But I can't—I've got a date with the boss and his family down at Peabody Point."

He gave a shake to the lines, the horse broke into a trot, and John was left staring after him with a strange feeling rendering him uncomfortable. He felt that he ought to go to Peabody Point instead of Whisky Falls.

CHAPTER XI

WHISKY FALLS

THE evening meal at Main Camp was a hurried, excited affair that Saturday evening. The men who had drawn money gulped down their food, flung on their caps and set out in groups for Whisky Falls, driven with the craving for excitement which was more compelling than the mere want of food.

They walked swiftly and lightly, their heads held high, their eyes bright, eagerly anticipating the searing pleasures that lay before them. It was for this that they laboured all the week, risking bones and even life to earn the wherewithal to risk health, reason and life dabbling with the poisons of their place of play.

In bodily perfection and nobility of stature these woodsmen probably averaged as well as any similar body of white men to be found in the world; but their souls were the souls of boys in the barbaric age, eager only for to-day's play, unthinking of the morrow.

Old Nels came for John after most of the men had left. In his belt under his mackinaw were stuck two short, heavy-calibre revolvers.

"I take these along to be sure," he said, buttoning the coat over them. "You don't take anything. Sometimes things get pretty rough at the Falls and I ain't going to let them put us out of business."

"Nels," said John sceptically, "are you trying to scare me, too?"

The old man gave him a look of disapproval.

"You wait and see," he muttered. "Come on now; it's a bad business; let's have it over as soon as we can."

In spite of his age and his short legs Nels led the way out of camp at a woodsman's stride that it taxed the younger man to follow. At times the ridiculous phase of the situation smote John and he laughed aloud. Nels pursued his way grimly, not even pausing to turn around to inquire the reason for his companion's merriment.

After an hour's walk the trail dipped into a ravine and from then on followed the river bed, a mere path on a ledge of rock. The trees here were of a size to inspire in John a feeling of awe, and he judged rightly that they were in the forest which he had heard called King Pines. Suddenly in the solemn stillness of the woods came the rumble of falling water, though the river itself was covered with a sheet of ice. A moment later John found himself mounting a rise on to a plateau, and there before his eyes he saw gleaming through the timber the lights of their destination, Whisky Falls.

There were perhaps half a dozen one-story log buildings of various sizes. They stood side by side facing the falls which tumbled down a slit in the plateau, and the windows of each of them were bright with light. Men passed to and fro before these lights, singing, shouting, staggering. Occasionlly a door opened and from within came a medley of laughter, music, shouting, and, what sounded like blasphemy in the great woods, the shrill sounds of maudlin women's voices. John sickened.

"Hold on, Nels," he called. "I don't care for this at all."

"No, no," growled the old man. "I don't care for it, but it's got to be done. You stay here; I'll go ahead and see where Charley is."

He was gone possibly ten minutes when he returned and said briefly—

"Come on."

He led the way straight to the largest building in the row and entered, closely followed by John. The building consisted of one large room, generously lighted with hanging oil lamps. A long bar ran along one side of the room. Along the other were ranged gambling games varying from a crap-table near at hand to the roulette-wheel in the far corner.

On a raised platform at the end of the room, veiled in a cloud of vile tobacco smoke, sat a squat, broad Chinaman, his face like a mask, his narrowed eyes watching all things in the room with the keenness of a hawk. He was in his shirt sleeves and—the right sleeve of his carefully laundered white shirt dangling empty at his side.

"Is that Wah Song?" whispered John.

Nels nodded and John stood and stared. The mere appearance of a Chinaman in the room was out of place; but this figure, better dressed than any other man there, sitting motionless upon the raised perch, seemed to dominate the place like some weird idol of evil. The slit-like eyes in the broad, flat face were constantly upon the three bartenders as they made change behind the bar, upon the faro-dealer as he pulled the cards from the box, upon the roulette man as he whined his siren song and spun the ball, and upon the fifty woodsmen who milled and danced, laughed, shouted, cursed and quarrelled in the middle of the big room. Beside him, close to his left hand, stood a sawed-off shotgun.

John stood and stared on until there came a cry from Nels—

"Look out!"

A blow from behind stretched him flat on the floor, a weight fell upon him, and he was rolling on the floor in the grip of Big Charley, fighting furiously to get the upper hold.

Though the blow had been struck foully, not a man

moved to interfere. This was the game as it was played in the woods; the man who won was acclaimed victor no matter what means he used to win. Even Nels stood silent and looked on. It was the bookkeeper's fight. He should have kept his eyes open once he had entered the enemy's ground.

After the first furious onslaught John's wits began to clear. He was not hurt, and he knew he could outlast his assailant. He worked until his left arm suddenly clipped his foe's neck in chancery. With all his might he gripped and hung on. Presently his right arm, too, was free and his hand flew around Big Charley's head and, gripping the huge, fat jaw, began to twist.

It was a deadly hold. Slowly the bull neck of the giant began to give. His huge hands tore in vain to loose the hold. Slowly, cruelly John twisted the head around until human flesh and bone could stand no more. A gasping, choking sound came from the bully's throat.

"Holler 'nough!" cried Nels. "Make him holler 'nough!"

"Don't do it, Charley!" cried several of the big man's partisans. "Don't do it!"

But Charley was whipped. His eyes were starting from his head and the blood was drumming in his ears.

" 'Nough!" he gurgled. The room rang with a mighty shout, cruel derision for the vanquished mingling with acclaim for the man who won.

John suddenly rolled the great bulk from him and sprang to his feet. He was panting and trembling from exertion, but Charley lay on the floor, flat on his back, painfully gasping back the life that had nearly been choked from him.

And now the men from Main Camp pressed around to hail their champion.

"Squeezed him, just squeezed the fight right out of him! Pulled the head off his shoulders! Whee-yow!

What a grip! Eh, you bookkeeper! Hats off to you. Line up, boys, line up! Come on, Mud! Drink your head off on me! Fightin' man—fightin' man of Main Camp! Who wants to stack their man up against ours? Come on, Mud, drink."

John's blood was up. He was sickened by the whole affair. These same men had pestered him into a row against his wishes. They would have jeered him out of camp had he been beaten. They would have stood by and let Charley beat him to a pulp.

"No, I'm not drinking with any of you," he said, and old Nels started at the tone of his voice. "I'm not going to stay here another minute. I came up here just to show you that you were wrong about me. You had a lot of fun with me this week. You're not going to have any more fun with me next week. And any man who thinks I can't make that good can step out right now and settle the question."

Not a man moved. It was not that they were afraid; there were men in that crew who would have stepped forth and tackled the dark fiend himself had he offered battle. But the coldness of John's nerve had won them. They saw that he meant it; that he was ready to battle one or all of them rather than take back one word that he had uttered. They knew nerve when they saw it, these men. For a moment they stared at him in silence. Nels quietly unbuckled the belt of his mackinaw. Then:

"Whee-yow! Three cheers for the bookkeeper of Main Camp—even if he won't drink with us. Hip, hip, hoo-ray!"

They were still cheering when John and Nels left the room.

Up on on his perch Wah Song's eyes narrowed further as he leaned over and whispered to the man at the roulette-wheel:

"Who dlat man, eh? Clelk at Mlain Camp, eh? U-u-um-m-m. Fightee like hell; tlakee like Bull heself; no drinkee. Clelk—hell! Him blig man you watchee see. I tellee Bull better watch out."

CHAPTER XII

BART GROWLS

THE three weeks between the date of John's arrival at Main Camp and Christmas passed without further adventure. John performed his duties as camp-clerk quietly and efficiently. During his spare hours he and Nels, and the cookee, Dugan, hunted deer and moose for camp provender. For each deer that they brought in Bart allowed five dollars to be credited to their wage account; for a moose the allowance was fifteen dollars. John, having charge of the books, credited his loot to Nels.

There was no closed season for the woodsman, John found, and the deer were plentiful. John had had much hunting experience of various sorts, but he was the veriest tyro compared to old Nels and to the youthful, woods-bred Dugan. Dugan could discover the whereabouts of deer with all but the certainty of a trained hound; and whenever the roar of Nels' old 45-90 shattered the Winter silence John left his run-way and went straight toward the sound, knowing positively that the quarry was down.

The old man's skill with the rifle was uncanny. Once, in a slashing, Dugan, John and Nels, walking side by side, rifles on their shoulders, jumped two bucks and a doe at two hundred yards. Nels fired three shots before either of his companions could get into action, and each shot laid a deer dead in its tracks. Even the sophisticated Dugan gasped.

"Whew!" he whistled. "I wouldn't want to get into a shooting scrape with you, old timer. You didn't even put the butt to your shoulder!"

Since the affair at Whisky Falls the men had treated John with a remarkable degree of respect. Added to this his natural good humour, his ability to pick tunes out of an old guitar which one of the men owned, and to sing excellently more songs than the woodsmen ever dreamed existed, helped to make him popular.

By the time Christmas came around most of the men who at first were inclined to be hostile to him were friendly to a degree. Bart, on the other hand, made no effort to conceal the fact that his attitude toward John had changed soon after the night at the Falls. Hitherto he had treated John with a certain degree of contempt, ridiculing him at the slightest opportunity. Now he plainly showed that he regarded John with suspicion. He no longer indulged in tight-lipped jests at his clerk's expense, and twice John swung suddenly around to find the foreman studying him suspiciously.

On the morning of Christmas Eve the explosion came. John had been busy all the morning and half the night before preparing the pay-roll and drawing checks for such of the men as planned to leave camp for the holidays. He had completed his task, placed the books in the office and, whistling merrily, turned about to find the silent-footed foreman leaning over the desk, eying him malevolently.

Bart's face was thrust close to John's, his long jaw was thrust wickedly forward, and the lips above them were drawn in out of sight. And once more John thought of prison pallor as he looked at Bart's pale face.

The foreman moved until he was fairly over John. His hand was behind him on his hip where he always carried a revolver.

"Mud," he drawled with a lowering of eyelids, "who

are you, what are you, and what do you want in this camp?"

It was the first time in his life that John looked into a face with murder reeking from it. The face pressed closer; the eyes were directly before his eyes; the jaw was thrust close to his. He recoiled from it as from a maddened beast. For the moment there Bart stood revealed in the most deadly depths in him, and in that flash John's mind formed two pictures: one of Bart smiling and graceful before Belle Peabody, and one of him as he was now.

Then John knew that the inevitable conflict between this man and himself had begun and he slowly took hold of himself and, sitting up straight, looked straight back into Bart's eyes without quivering.

"Why do you ask that, Mr. Bart?" he said quietly.

For a space of seconds the room was deadly with its silence. John fully expected to see Bart's hand come up from the hip with the gun in it; he had braced himself to overturn the desk and leap into battle for his life. He did not take his eyes from Bart's. He felt himself growing stronger than this man with the face of evil, even though he was unarmed. Slowly he leaned forward, thrusting his jaw close to the other man's.

For an instant the balance hung so, the two evenly facing each other, and then—the hand did not come up from the hip with the gun in it. For Bart gave way. He drew back. His eyes wavered. They could not hold up; they turned away.

"—— —— you!" screamed Bart, furiously. "What do you mean by talking to me like that, here in this camp where I'm boss, and you're nothing but a —— clerk? Hah? Whaddayah mean!"

John replied with another question, icily uttered.

"Bart, what are you trying to put over me?"

For the time being the power of speech deserted Bart.

He took a step backward; he was uncomfortable before John's eyes, even with the gun on his hip. John, who had calculated on the possibilities of getting that gun in one tremendous spring did Bart attempt to bring it into action, came softly around from behind the desk, to keep within reach, and repeated his question.

"What kind of a bluff is it, Bart? You know what I am here. I'm John Mud, I'm your clerk, and I'm trying to learn something about the logging business. Now what kind of a game are you pulling on me with those ugly questions?"

"Game, eh?" Bart had recovered some of his sense of superiority. His thin lips drew apart, tight on the teeth, and he snarled: "You say you're just Jack Mud, you say you're just my clerk, you say you're trying to learn the logging business. I say you're a —— liar. You signed for your duds with another name at first, and Old Man Peabody don't invite common clerks down to his house for Christmas dinner; and—look at that!"

He threw at John a scrap of paper which he had crumpled viciously in his hand. John unfolded it and read in his uncle's gigantic scrawl:

BART:

You will let Nels drive the new man Mud down to the Point, to be here by six, Christmas Eve. Let them take the Morgan mare and a cutter. You will stay in camp over the holidays yourself to keep the men in hand. I don't want any burned stables like last year. J. P.

"Well," snarled Bart as John looked up, "what have you got to say?"

"Nothing," said John. "Except that I don't see what there's in it for you to get so warm about. Mr. Peabody told me when I—when he hired me that I was to be invited to Christmas dinner. I don't see anything for you to jump on me for in that."

Bart swung around, strode to the door, turned back, and glared at him for the space of a full minute.

"Oh, don't you?" he drawled in his most dangerous tone. "Well, I do. Yes, indeed, Mr. Mud, I do. And if I were you, Mud, I don't think I'd come back to Main Camp after having Christmas dinner with Mr. Peabody. No, I don't think if I were you, I'd ever come back, no matter what you are."

"Why not?"

Bart paused in the doorway, and his lips scarcely moved as he said in a low voice—

"Because after Christmas Main Camp will be awfully unhealthy for anybody using the name of Mud."

Shortly after noon Nels came driving up to the office door with a cutter and John stepped in. A light snow had fallen during the night, and the tote-road was covered with fleecy white unmarked by hoof or sleigh-runner. As they went slowly out of camp, the spirited horse danced, sleigh-bells jingling, and the men whom they passed shouted out good-natured greetings and holiday wishes.

"Hey, there, Mud, where you going? Ain't you going to stay in camp and sing for us Christmas? Aw, pshaw! Well, Merry Christmas, boys, Merry Christmas!"

The holiday spirit was in the crisp air, and John warmed at the feeling toward him evinced by these big boy-men. On both sides of the tote-road the pine branches hung covered with soft snow. A bright sun lighted the world. All sound was softened. The horse lifted his head, nostrils extended, in sheer delight at the day, and the two men behind him followed suit.

"By golly!" murmured old Nels, sweeping his arm about in a gesture that embraced all the woods. "It's fine, ain't it, just fine! The woods is the place on a day like this!"

"You bet!" agreed John. "But, say, Nels, what's the matter with Bart?"

The old man indulged in one of his silent chuckles.

"Good joke on him. He had me curry this horse and polish the harness and wash the cutter, for him to drive in to the Point with; and last night Wolf John gives me word for him to stay in camp and to let me drive you in —with the outfit he'd got ready for himself. Could you blame him for being sore? Did he jump on you, too?"

John repeated the conversation that had taken place in the office. Nels looked at him sharply and a look of admiration came into his old eyes.

"You faced him down, did you?" He shook his head. "Bull Bart is a hard man to face down. They ain't nobody in these woods been able to give him eye to eye and not quit except Wolf John. You got to keep your eye skinned, now he's served notice on you; but I guess if you spoke a word to the old man he'd make Bart sing a different tune, eh?" he concluded shrewdly.

"I don't see that the old man has got anything to do with it," retorted John. "It's between Bart and myself. I don't understand why he jumped on me in that fashion, but I'm certainly not going to run to the old man about it."

They drove in silence for a space.

"'Member what I told you about Bart sparking up to Belle?" said Nels finally. "That's why he jumped on you."

"But why——"

"She's asked him 'bout you ever' time he's seen her these last three weeks."

A mile passed before another word was spoken. Occasionally Nels glanced sidewise at his companion, but John's set face betrayed in no way how strangely his heart had leaped at this information.

"Going back?" asked Nels.

"Back where?" said John, roused from his dreams.

"To Main Camp."

"Certainly. I couldn't quit now."

"Giddap!" The old man set the horse into a trot. "When we get back to camp I'll give you one of my six-guns," he said, "just to make the thing some ways even."

CHAPTER XIII

WHY WOLF JOHN WROTE TO HIS KIN

THE horse trotted steadily on his way; the sleighbells jingled musically. In the west the sun drew nearer and nearer to the black timber-line of the horizon. For a while it seemed to halt there, a great red ball of fire, balanced upon the curtain of night. Then, in a few seconds, it seemed, it slipped down behind the timber.

The world, which a moment before was lighted and warmed by its rays, became grey-dark and cold, as a room in which an open fire suddenly is extinguished. The swift-coming night of the northern Winter was upon them. So lost was John in the new thoughts that Nels' words had opened for him that he started up as from a sleep when Nels pulled up before the big house on the hill at Peabody Point with a gruff:

"Here you are, Mud. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Nels."

He crossed the wide porch and pressed the bell, a variety of emotions stirring his heart.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Mud!"

It was Belle herself, standing in the doorway, holding out her hand, beaming at him with those wonderful eyes, smiling at him as if actually glad to see him. It was no mere touch of the fingers that she gave him, but a full, hearty clasp, and John thrilled and stammered his greeting. But he did not release her hand. He held it much longer than was necessary, much longer than was proper; in fact he held it after the greeting had been said, and

then, as if suddenly aware of it, he dropped it in much confusion, and they stood for a moment laughing heartily at each other.

"I—I beg your pardon, Miss Peabody," stammered John as she ushered him in.

"And what for?" said Belle quietly, leading the way in. "For giving me a good handshake? I liked it."

In the light of the hallway John saw that she was dressed in a dress of something white and filmy—he was no expert in dress-goods—and that there was a ribbon of some sort in her hair and that, possibly because he had spent three weeks in camp with nothing but unshaven men's faces to look upon, she was more bewilderingly beautiful than ever. Also, she seemed to have changed, to have matured slightly in some way too subtle for him to define, except to decide that she was more the woman.

"How do you like logging, Mr. Mud?" she asked as he divested himself of rubbers and mackinaw in the hallway. "And have you learned to like our grim, forbidding woods?"

"They aren't grim and forbidding any more," he laughed. "I'm getting chummy with them fast."

"Fine!" she cried, leading the way toward Wolf John's room. "Oh, Uncle John!" she called. "Here's Mr. Mud. Will you excuse me, Mr. Mud? I—if you please—am playing cook!"

Wolf John Peabody was standing spreadlegged before the fireplace, his hands behind his back, his head bowed, but as John entered the head went up and a tiny smile showed in one corner of the old man's mouth.

"Welcome, Mud!" he called. He did not offer to shake hands, but his manner was more friendly than before. "Your name is still Mud, you'll notice, though if what I've heard of you is true, I begin to suspect there's a big new lump of a man who'll soon be bearing the name of Peabody in these woods. Lad, wherever in the cities

did you pick up nerve enough to tackle a horse of a man like the big Swede? Sit down! Let's hear about you."

John suffered himself to answer a multitude of questions dragging from him the story of the two fights with Big Charley.

"Huh huh!" grunted the old man, pleased. "Modest, too, and that's right. Old Nels gave me the straight of it; I'm glad to hear that you don't count it any big thing, because it isn't. Fighting is a poor business—unless the other fellow says he's the best man. And now one question, nephew: Do you stay in the woods, or not?"

John looked out of the window toward where the park-like belt of straight pines ringed the settlement around. But it was Belle that he saw—Belle, and the smile she had greeted him with at the door.

"I feel at home here, Uncle John," he said suddenly. "I stay—if I'm wanted."

"Huh." The old man nodded curtly, as at a bargain that was closed. "And now I will tell you why I wrote to your father. You have heard something about the King Pine situation, and the gang at Whisky Falls?"

John related what Nels had told him.

"Exactly. Well, that gang up there has got on the good side of the Indians—if Indians have any good side—with their cursed whisky, and have got the tribal managers to refuse to extend my lease. If I don't log the King Pines before next Spring I'll never log 'em, and, by the Lord Harry, log 'em I will! Peabody timber this is, mine by right of discovery. I cruised this country before any other white man knew of it. I located those King Pines; they were mine by all the rights they are; and then I discovered that they were on Chippewa, and it took me ten years to get a one-year lease on it.

"Do you think I look like the man to let ten years'

work go for nothing? No! Peabody timber that is, and Peabody saw-logs it is going to make—even if it's only young John Mud Peabody who lives to see them behind the booms. Now, young fellow, do you glimpse the idea of why I wanted a male of my own kind by my side? Son of my own I never had; but those devils are not going to keep that timber out of the Peabody tribe."

He had dropped his head far forward. The big shoulders were bowed, and he looked an old, forlorn man, rather than the king-like figure that he had presented on the day of John's arrival in Peabody Point.

"Has that sign we saw up in the King Pines got on your nerves, Uncle John?" asked John, striving to speak lightly. "You don't really believe they'd dare to do anything of the sort; you know you'll beat them before they get a chance."

"It isn't that, Mud," said the old man, smiling. "It's not merely this; it's not merely the threats of Lowrey's whelps, and the fact that I know they'd make good if they had the chance. But a man who lives long in the woods, by himself, where things are about as they were in the beginning, he comes to feel things that he cannot see, that he cannot put in words. He gets closer to things, to life and death. He sees trees born, he sees trees getting ready to die. He has a 'feel' that tells him when he is near water, when he is nearing a clearing, when another man is approaching him, and, most of all, a feel that tells him when he is nearing the end of a trail.

"It's all Indian to you, I know, John. You're from the city, where men live in stone houses and cover the earth with asphalt, and are so far removed from natural things that they think they see all there is to see, because they are so blind and so without the 'feel' that they can not see the vast scheme of life as Nature ordains it.

"But we—some of us—who have kept close to the woods, we have that feel in some degree. Call it animal

instinct if you will; call it 'being fey,' as the Scotchmen have it; it's all one. What did I say? Most of all the feel when he is nearing the end of a trail? Yes. And that feel has been on me many moons now: that I am nearing the end of my trail—a long one, but fairly straight. It's here," he said, abruptly, thumping himself over the heart.

His face suddenly turned grey from pain and his mouth opened as if gasping for breath.

"—— the luck!" he growled when the spasm was over. "Nothing ever stopped me when I had anything to do; now this old heart of mine is trying to stop me—just now when I need it worst. Your heart's all right, isn't it, Mud? Well, that's good. I want yours to keep on pumping after this one of mine's stopped. Long enough to see the King Pines timber back of the Peabody Logging Company's booms," he added. "Now that's why I wanted one of my own kin here—if he is big enough to wear a man's shoes."

As he recovered from the shock of this revelation John attempted to speak of a certain famous heart specialist in the city.

"Tut! Don't talk nonsense, boy. Do you think I'd be ready to give up until I knew for sure I was sawed through? I had that man up here. He charged me a thousand dollars for telling me to keep 'absolutely quiet' and I might last several years. The damn fool! If Bart hadn't pushed him away, I'd have tossed him out of the window."

John sat up at the mention of Bart's name.

"Bart knows—about it, then?" he asked.

"Didn't I say he saved the doctor from being manhandled?"

"When was it you had the doctor up here, Uncle John?"

"Last Summer."

"About the time Belle came home from school?"

Wolf John looked at his nephew sharply.

"Now why in the devil do you ask that? What business is it of yours? Your name is still Mud around here, remember. Yes, that was about when it was, if you must know. Why?"

John did not reply at once.

"Uncle John, you've got Bart here as your right-hand man," he said slowly. "You trust him as you do yourself, and he's the best logging boss in the woods. Then why do you want me here?"

"Haven't I told you? That's Peabody timber up there, and they're not going to get it away, even if they do get me first."

"No," said John steadily, "that isn't why."

"What!" His uncle glared at him angrily. Then his gaze went to the floor. "No, you're right. Bart, he's ambitious for himself. And there's little Belle." His hands shook slightly. "Good God, boy! Would you have me go leaving her without kith or kin, or any hold on anybody that I could trust to see that the world gave her a square deal? For myself I wouldn't give a ——, but little Belle——"

He paused and sat staring at the floor. Presently he looked up shrewdly.

"Remember, Mud, your name's still Mud with me. Even though I say these things to you, you're still John Mud. Hist!" His eyes lighted up as footsteps sounded in the hallway. "There she is now. Mud—Mud, she doesn't know—about me. She isn't to know. Understand. Not a hint! Oh ho, Belle!" he cried cheerily as she threw open the door. "What d'you say?"

"Dinner's ready," said Belle. "I hope it doesn't make you ill, but I cooked it all myself."

"Make us ill!" laughed Wolf John, as if he had not a worry in the world. "Well, if it does we'll have little

Belle to nurse us, and worse things than that could happen to a man, eh, Mud?"

At the table Wolf John was entirely his old self; he indulged in merry raillery—mostly at John's expense—as if he had not a care in the world.

"Tell us all about the logging business, Mud," he said. "You must know about all there is to learn about it by this time, don't you? No? Well, well! Belle, hear that; he hasn't learned all about the logging business in three weeks. Do you think he's worth keeping on the pay roll?"

Belle smiled in a serene way that showed how familiar she was with the old man's rough humour.

"You're not kind to Mr. Mud, Uncle John," she said.

Wolf John broke into uproarious laughter.

"Hear that! Oh, hear that! 'Not kind to Mr. Mud!'" He laughed only harder as he saw John grow flustered under his joking. "We'll have Bull Bart tuck him into his bunk at night! What do you say, Belle?"

"Your partridge is growing cold, Uncle John," replied Belle quietly.

John laughed.

"What's funny?" demanded Wolf John.

"The idea of Mr. Bart tucking any one in at night," replied John, and watching Belle closely he noted that a troubled expression flitted over her face at the mention of Bart's name.

"Bart will be tucking 'em in to-morrow night," said Wolf John grimly. "That's a man's job, putting a camp to bed after Christmas celebration. Something about logging, Mud; it's more important to be able to handle your men than your logs. Some never can do it; they're built that way."

He looked thoughtfully at John a moment; then he devoted himself to the partridge before him. For the rest of the meal he was silent, as if too occupied with a

new idea to take part in the conversation. John and Belle had the talk to themselves. John had little to say. The gift of easy, meaningless conversation never had been his, and before Belle he was all but tongue-tied.

"You've got to sing for us after dinner, Mr. Mud," said she. "Oh, Nels has told me how you've sung for the men. I think that's jolly. You'll do as much for us as you would for the men, won't you?"

"Why did Nels want to tell you about that?" muttered John, embarrassed.

"I asked him to tell me all about you," said Belle frankly.

He looked at her. It was on his tongue to ask why she had done that, but his nerve failed him.

"My singing is only fitted for camp consumption," he said. "I think Nels might have omitted that."

"Don't you like old Nels, Mr. Mud?"

"You bet! He's a brick," said John heartily.

"I'm glad," she said. "Nels and I are old, old friends."

"He's my friend, too."

"You bet he is," said Belle. "He—he thinks you're fine."

"Thinks—I'm—great?" stammered John.

"Shall I tell you what he said?" she asked mischievously. "I ought to; it was really fine."

"Don't, Miss Peabody; please don't."

"He said: 'His name may be Mud, but his heart is all gold.' Now! Wasn't that pretty of him? I suppose it wasn't proper conduct of me to tell it, was it? I don't care; I wanted you to know, because—because I did. I liked old Nels a lot more for saying that. You're not angry?"

"Angry!" he stammered, and was tongue-tied. The meal was at an end now, and suddenly old Peabody smote the table.

"Yes," he said, "it's worth the risk. Mud, come into the library."

He led the way into the book-lined room, and John followed, wondering.

"Mud," said his uncle, when the door was closed, "you're going back to Main Camp to-night."

John stared at him in surprise. He saw his uncle's sharp eyes watching him for a sign of rebellion.

"All right," he said. "When shall I start?"

"Not curious, eh? Don't want to know why, eh? None of your business, eh?"

"You wouldn't tell me if I did ask," said John.

The door opened and Belle came in to find the two men looking at one another with set faces.

"Uncle! Mr. Mud! Whatever in the world is the matter? Why did you leave the table like that?"

She looked from one to the other in alarm. A wry smile crept into one corner of Wolf John's mouth.

"Nothing at all the matter, Belle," he said. "Mr. Mud has just remembered that he's got to go back to Main Camp to-night, and I'm—I'm trying to make him stay."

"To-night?" Belle looked the disappointment that she felt. "Surely you're not going away so soon, Mr. Mud?"

"He says he's got to go to-night, and right away at that," interposed the uncle dryly. "He's a stubborn sort of a fellow, Belle; I don't think we'll be able to change his mind. When did you say you were going, Mud: as soon as you can get down the hill and get a horse hooked up for you?"

He laughed dryly.

"Yes; he's a stubborn fellow, Belle, and he says he's got to go right away. Run along now, Belle; I've got some business to talk over with this stubborn fellow before he starts."

He waited until the door had closed upon the girl, then seated himself at the writing table.

"You're going to take a note to Bart."

He wrote a single line and handed the note to John.

"Go down the hill and find Nels. He'll get a horse for you. You'll go out alone, because Nels is going to stay in the settlement over Christmas. Give the note to Bart as soon as you get to camp. That's all. Then stay in camp until Bart gets back. Good night."

"Good night," said John.

As he went out he paused on the broad porch for a moment and looked up at the starlit sky. A breeze was stirring the pines about the settlement and the sough of the branches seemed to echo the storm that was in his heart. Peace there was all over the face of earth and heavens, peace and quiet so far as the eye could see. But the gentle swish of pine boughs was a hint and a threat of the storm and strife lurking beneath the elemental calm. John's feet were on the stairs when a whisper came to him from behind a near-by pillar.

"Mr. Mud! What is it; what is the matter? You and Uncle John haven't quarrelled, have you? Has anything terrible happened? You—you look troubled—unhappy. Won't you tell me what it is, please? I—I'm sorry if anything has happened."

John looked down at Belle as she stood before him in the starlit night. There was pain in the girl's eyes and in her trembling lips. A new thrill went through him as he looked upon her. Lone and helpless she looked out there in the night and John thrilled and was glad of it. He reached out his hand, and she took it and held it between her two hands for an instant.

"Nothing is the matter, Miss Peabody," he said. "Please don't look frightened or worried. If you do, I'll remember it and be blue all the time I'm in Main Camp."

"Oh, I don't want you to do that," she whispered. "But are you sure——"

"That everything is all right? Yes, quite sure. Will you take my word for it? There's nothing for you to worry about."

She looked at him without replying.

"Won't you take my word for it?" he asked.

"Yes," she said simply. "Because even if you're lying, I believe you're doing it for a good purpose."

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOMAN IN THE SNOW

DOWN in the settlement he quickly found old Nels, who, though greatly surprised, soon had a horse and cutter ready.

"Say the word and I'll go back to camp with you," he said as John stepped in and took the lines. "No? Don't want me? Well, anyhow, look in my shoe-packs under my bunk when you get to camp. You'll find a six-gun in one of them, all loaded. And if you have to use it shoot low—good luck!"

The spirited horse took the cutter out of the settlement at a brisk trot. In the woods John pulled up to a walk. He was in no mood to hurry away from Peabody Point.

The horse, going at a reined-in walk, began to whine and dance, and John suddenly woke up to the fact that it was growing bitter cold. Straight down from the star-filled north a wind born in the ice-caves of the Arctics was bringing the inevitable cold-snap of that time of the year for that latitude, and John, with his face against the wind, shivered and let the horse break into a sharp trot. He soon found that, while the brisk pace enabled the horse to keep warm, he himself grew colder the more rapidly he drove.

He was five miles when he leaped from the cutter and began to run at the horse's head. The intelligent animal, at first alarmed, soon displayed the thankfulness that domestic animals display at the nearness of humankind in the wilderness. With a whinny he muzzled John's shoul-

der. John laughed and patted him. Then they went on, the horse with his muzzle close to John's back, and dropping to a walk as John slowed up, breaking into a trot when John's long legs led the way. In this fashion they were jogging down the far side of a hog-back within rifle-shot of Main Camp when John stopped so suddenly that the horse's muzzle rammed him in the back before the beast could stop. Something dark was lying huddled in the snow of the tote-road. As John stooped over, it struggled and moaned.

"Good God! A woman!" In the dim starlight John caught a glimpse of a pale, bruised face and for a moment he was so dumfounded that he could only stand and stare.

"What say?" The woman opened her eyes and spoke sleepily.

Numbly she struggled to her knees, swaying so for an instant, then toppled stiffly back into the snow. In two seconds John had her in his arms and was carrying her back to the cutter. The sudden movement and the warmth of his virile young body seemed to rouse the woman from her lethargy. Her eyes opened as he placed her gently in the cutter seat and she tried to smile.

Even there in the half darkness John saw that once this woman had been beautiful in slender, refined fashion, and to his amazement he saw that she was well dressed, that a necklace glistened on her white throat and that there were many rings on her ice-cold fingers. She struggled long before she was able to speak, smiling pathetically all the while.

"Just frozen, not drunk," she managed to say at last. "Got caught in the cold snap; wasn't dressed for it. Weak heart."

"Good heavens! I should say you weren't dressed for it," said John. He caught the ice-cold fingers between his own and began to rub.

He took snow and rubbed as precaution against frost-bite. When he felt the deadness go out of her hands and the blood of life begin to warm them he tore the big muskrat-hide mittens from the strings over his shoulders and placed her hands in their warm interiors. She watched him, silent, motionless, with a sceptical smile on her pallid lips. Her teeth began to chatter.

"That's a good sign," she said faintly. "I'm not dead yet."

"Of course you're not," said John briskly. "Nothing of the sort. You're just a little frozen."

He whipped off his mackinaw and, handling her as if she were a child, buttoned and strapped it closely about her shivering body. He crammed his heavy fur cap over the light knitted affair that covered her head. Then he lifted her from the cutter and set her on her feet.

"Walk as fast as you can," he ordered, passing his arm around her. "That's the only way to get the blood moving again."

She laughed weakly and allowed herself to be dragged up and down the road. As the chilled blood began to move through her veins her movements became more elastic and rapid.

"Run," commanded John, and they ran in a circle about the cutter. She stopped, panting, presently.

"I'm all right now," she said. "And now—what?"

"Now you'll get into the cutter and we'll drive on to Main Camp where you can get out of the cold and get something warm to eat and wear."

"Main Camp!" She stepped back. "I can't go back—I can't go there."

John was amazed.

"Can't go there? Why, where were you going on this road at this time of night?"

She smiled sceptically again.

"Why, to Whisky Falls, of course."

"To Whisky Falls? Then you were going from Main Camp?"

"Yes," she said defiantly. "Anything else?"

"But don't you know that this is the road to Peabody Point?"

"Get out!"

"Yes, it is; I'm on my way from the Point to Main Camp."

She smiled foolishly.

"I'm a peach of a woodser, ain't I?" she said. "I leave Main Camp for Whisky Falls and get mixed up and go toward the Point. That would have been one on me if I'd made the Point. Well, I've just got to turn around and hike for the Falls."

"You can't do it," said John firmly. "You couldn't make it; you must come with me to Main Camp."

"I daren't; I can't." She shuddered and stared around wildly, her mittened hands going to her bruised face. "I've got to go to the Falls. I may not make it, but I'd have an easier time freezing to death in the snow than if I went back to Main Camp now. Well?"

She looked up at him with the pathetic, sceptical smile on her lips.

"Well," said John bluntly, "if you're sure you can't go to Main Camp——"

"I tell you I can't! I'd die in the road first."

"Then I'll have to drive you up to Whisky Falls, that's all. Will you get in, please, so we can get started?"

A look of wonderment became mingled with her sceptical smile as she climbed hesitatingly into the cutter. She looked up at John's face as he seated himself respectfully beside her.

"Are you really going to go out of your way that much—for me?" she asked. Her flippancy and assurance were gone, and she spoke shyly.

"Why, you wouldn't hardly expect a man to leave a

lady to walk that far on a night like this, would you?" said John.

She looked away.

"Stop your kidding," she said bitterly.

They came to where, just outside of the Main Camp clearing, the small road branched off to Whisky Falls.

"You'd better let me get out here," she said weakly. "You go into camp; I'll make it—somehow, I guess."

"I hope I haven't offended you," said John, as he steered the horse on to the road to the Falls. "But even if I have, my job for the present is to get you to your destination."

"Offended me?" she laughed mockingly. "That's rich! That's a joke."

Without offering an explanation she lapsed into silence which remained unbroken for miles. The cold was growing more intense; the pair of them cowered down behind the robes as well as they could, wasting as little breath as possible in speech. When they came to where the road ceased and the little trail began which ran along the river side, through the ravine and up the plateau to the buildings of Whisky Falls, John pulled up and stiffly tied the horse to a tree.

"No, no," she cried, springing from the cutter. "You mustn't go up to the Falls. You—you ain't our kind. Don't spoil it! Don't ask to go with me; don't dirty yourself by having anything to do with such truck as us."

"I—I'm certainly going to see that you get to—to your friends all right," stammered John, uncomfortably embarrassed. "Come on; I'll see you up the hill, anyhow. I insist. Come, you'll freeze here."

He led her over the narrow path to the slit in the rocks where the path went up to the top of the pleateau.

"Please, please!" she panted, dragging back there. "I'm all right; I swear by my mother I'm all right. I'll

go on and be in my—my place in a couple of minutes. But don't you come—you—you're too clean!"

She saw his bare hands, his lightly covered head, his uncovered sweater. With a cry she tore the mittens, mackinaw and cap from her and threw them at him.

"I don't suppose you'll wear them now that they've been on me," she moaned. "I don't blame you. Oh, oh! Are there really men like you in this world?"

John was putting on cap, mittens and mackinaw without a word. She came close to him.

"You know what I am, don't you?" she whispered in awe. "You knew all the time; I see it in your eyes; and yet you helped me. And you—you don't want anything, either; I can see that, too. Listen: I know who you are, Mr. Mud. I saw you the night you licked Big Charley. And let me tell you something, Mr. Mud, Bart has got it in for you to the limit."

"You know Bart?" asked John.

"Do I know him—the devil?" She pointed to the bruises on her face. "Look at that. Bart did that job. Do I know him? He owns me, body and soul."

At the sight of the bruised face a groan of horror and anger escaped from John's lips.

"Don't—don't you trouble yourself one bit about it," said the woman quickly. "It doesn't matter a bit; I'm used to it. But I am going to try some day to make it right with you because you saved my life to-night. No; I don't mean that: I mean because—because you treated me the way you did, and knew all the time. If I ever can do anything—but, pshaw! all I can do is—thanks and God bless——"

"Hold on!" cried John, a sudden inspiration flashing through him. "Maybe you can do something, if you really want to. Does Bart know who I am?"

"No; he suspects you're a spotter of some kind, though."

"I'm not," said John.

"But you're on Wolf John's side?"

"I am—decidedly so!"

"Against—the other side?"

"Against the men who are trying to scare him out of logging the King Pines, which are legitimately his for one year's logging," replied John firmly.

The woman was silent for some time.

"I—I'm on the other side," she said faintly. "Do you want me to get out?"

John laughed.

"Of course not. But they're a lot of crooks."

"I know it," she whispered brokenly. "I know I ought to quit them, but I can't. I can't; I'm afraid."

"Who are you afraid of? Of Bart?"

She shook her head.

"Of Bart? No, not so much. Somebody else—somebody worse," she whispered.

"Wah Song?" suggested John.

She was silent.

"Tell me this—if you really want to do something because I've helped you: Is Bart one of your gang?"

Her eyes suddenly grew large and distended with terror.

"What made you say that?" she gasped. "I haven't said anything like that, have I? No, no; don't think that—don't say that about Bart, please."

"Are Wah Song and Bart partners?"

"No. I don't know. I don't know anything about what's going on—not much, anyhow. I—oh, I wish you hadn't found me there in the road. I wish I dared tell you. Oh, I wish I was dead! But tell Miss Peabody—Belle—No, no! I'm afraid—I'm afraid to tell you!"

She turned and ran swiftly up the cleft in the rocks. A short way off she paused and looked back.

"I won't let them do it," she cried sobbingly. "I won't

if I can help it. If I can I—I'll show you that even one like me can be human."

John stared after her as she disappeared up the path toward the lights of Whisky Falls. Then he got into the cutter and drove back to Main Camp, pondering generally on the problem of womankind, and about this poor woman's words about Belle in particular.

It was in the chill grey of morning that he pulled into camp, and the stablemen were just moving to their early tasks. The thermometer had fallen steadily all night and John was numbed near to helplessness as he stumbled from the cutter before the stable.

"Where's Bart?" he chattered to one of the lantern-carrying figures which were breaking open hay bales to feed the horses.

"Right here," came Bart's voice from behind him.

As John turned to face him the memory of the woman's bruised face drove the chill from his veins in a rush of anger, but he controlled himself and handed Bart the note from Wolf John without a word. Bart read by the light of a stableman's lantern, and looked triumphantly up at John.

"I guess you didn't make much of a hit down at the Point, did you, Mr. Mud?" he sneered. "Hook up the big iron grey to this cutter," he commanded a stableman. John had stumbled toward his sleeping quarters and Bart overtook him in a few giant strides.

"Thinking of staying in Main Camp, Mud?" he snapped.

"I am," said John.

"All right." Bart nodded grimly. "I haven't got time to stop and make it unhealthy for you just now. But if you're here when I come back I promise you that you'll find this place turned into a cold, bitter place for somebody, alias Jack Mud."

CHAPTER XV

CHRISTMAS DAY AT MAIN CAMP

CHRISTMAS DAY, after the custom of the woods, was a quiet holiday at Main Camp. More than half of the men had gone out of the wood the evening before. Some had drawn their time and had quit, desiring more time and freedom for the celebration of the day than camp rules would permit. Some had gone to spend the day with their families in the settlement.

The majority of those who had left camp, however, had gone to Whisky Falls for the inevitable spree, the stinging cold interfering not at all with the gratification of their appetites. The men remaining in camp were of the more quiet class, some married men whose families were too far away to be reached for the holiday, some decent, clean young fellows who were saving their money, and some—a scant few—to whom the red delights of Whisky Falls were no temptation. They constituted the sober, dependable element of the camp, men who could be relied upon.

Because of the bitterness of the day they celebrated their holiday mainly in the cook-shanty and the bunk-house. A few hardy spirits, led by the irrepressible Dugan, ventured forth after deer and came back cursing the weather. When John awoke and came into the bunk-house at noon, he was greeted with shouts of surprise and welcome. Some demanded a reason for his sudden return. To these John made no reply, the humiliation

which he had suffered at Home Camp still rankling in his bosom.

Other men thrust into his hands the old guitar and dragged him forth to a box serving as a dais at one end of the long room, buffeting him heartily and demanding that he play and sing lest worse befall him. John complied readily with their request, attacking the instrument, and roaring forth songs in an effort to still the dark thoughts that were troubling him.

"Give us 'Home Sweet Home,'" growled a grizzled old lumber-jack, and after John had played the first bars the men began to join in, rough, cracked voices shyly following the lead of their bolder fellows until the windows of the bunk-house rattled with the might of the chorus. As always happens in a crowd of rough, harsh-living men, that song touched the hearts of those who sang and listened.

When it was over the men sat silent, busy with their own thoughts. Three or four strolled to the windows and stood looking out; others found it necessary to rummage aimlessly after something in their bunks; and some lighted pipes with great ostentation.

"Home!" bitterly laughed "Whitey Jack," he of the silvered head. "For the last five Springs I've been starting home with a Winter's check in my pocket and those devils at Whisky Falls have sent me back here cleaned to the bone. Last Spring Curly Joe got me at poker. But not this Spring, boys! They don't get Whitey Jack this time; you'll see."

The boys laughed; for Jack had made this same statement in the same positive manner for the last five years.

"Curly Joe,'" repeated Brackett reminiscently. "'Member his run-in with Curly Joe, Jack?"

"Wasn't I there?" said Jack. "Didn't I see it with these here two eyes? It was right after the drive was down in the Spring—'bout fifteen years ago that was, too

—and the gang was celebrating out to Emil Blondet's road-house. Curly Joe was running the games; had a man at the wheel and the bank, and 'tended to the poker-game himself. He was from the West, Curly was, and as fine a man to look at as ever wore a mackinaw. Tall —must have been six feet and a half—and built to fit, with long curly black hair that got him his name. And shoot—that man was a better man with the rifle than old Nels."

An argument started over this statement, many of the men in camp questioning the possibility of there being a better shot than Nels. After the argument died down Jack resumed.

"Anyhow, he could outshoot anything I ever see go against him with the rifle, and he was quite a man other ways. He came to the bush with diamonds and jewelry and a roll that looked like the butt-end of a log. He was the king-bee while he was doing the humming, and he might have been a big man yet if one of the boys he trimmed hadn't swore he was using a hold-out. I forget who the lad was, but he used his knife and Curly Joe just took it away from him and broke his arm and threw him through the window. That was the third of the boys he'd laid out!

"One day old Wolf John walks into the poker-room, when Joe hasn't got anybody playing with him, slaps ten thousand dollars' worth of bills on the table and says:

" 'Mr. Tin Horn Gambler, if I thought you had anything but chicken feed in your clothes I'd give you a crack at that!' Curly Joe takes a look at Wolf John and another at the roll and then says quiet, 'Emil, bring me my roll out of the safe, and a fresh deck of cards.' He counts his bills up to ten thousand dollars and says, 'Haven't you got any real money?'

" 'Yes,' says the old man and slaps another package like the first on the table. 'Keep on counting,' he says.

"Curly Joe kind of wet his lips and finally shows down fourteen thousand dollars. 'Good enough,' says the old man and breaks open the deck. 'I've heard o' you,' says Curly; 'sometimes I ride for weeks to tame gents with a local reputation.'

"'Then they's no need for cards,' says Wolf John, stopping the deal. 'Put away the deck. Emil,' he says, 'open the trapdoor to your cellar. Mister Curly Joe,' he says, 'you and me'll go downstairs together, let Emil roll a whisky barrel on to the trap-door and leave it there for an hour. The man who's able to come up at the end gets the money.'

"Curly Joe, he wore a six-shooter on one hip and a skinning-knife on the other, and the old man's hands was flat on the table, but Curly has to kind of look away. I tell you, when the old man gets that way you kind of feel him pressing on you with those eyes of his.

"'I'm a gambler, not a butcher,' says Curly. 'I skin my meat without killing it,' and he deals 'em around. But Wolf John had him. He'd put it on him right at the start, and when the luck starts running against Curly Joe, it begins to bring out the streak that's up Curly's spine.

"Hour after hour they sat there, just the two of 'em, and little by little Curly Joe begins to wilt, and bigger and bigger the streak begins to show in him. Pretty soon he begins to wet his lips with his tongue and he says, 'How long you want to play?'

"'I'm going to play until I've broke you,' says Wolf John. 'You're going to sit here until you're smaller'n a pup dog that's tackled a grown bobcat. I'm going to send you out of here with your nerve gone,' says he. 'I'm going to show you it's expensive to shoot men on my pay-roll.'

"'Are you?' says Curly, and reaches for his six-gun.

"'I am,' says Wolf John, and he catches the wrist and

just squeezes it until the blood squirted from under Curly's fingernails. When Curly yells 'Enough' Wolf John lets him go, giving him back his gun.

"'Sit down and play,' he says. 'You're not a broken man yet.' Then they have it hour after hour again, and Joe looks like he's being hung up by his thumbs.

"Finally, when he's within a few hundred of the end of his roll, he begins trying to mark the cards, using his cigarette. Then they have it out, Curly with his skinning-knife and six-gun and the old man just with his bare hands. And when they're through Curly Joe is a broken man for life. Six months in the hospital, and when he comes out he's a twisted cripple that it hurts you to look at even if you know it was only what he had coming to him."

"But he can still shoot," volunteered Burns, of the bandaged head.

"Wha-a-at?" Whitey Jack was surprised. "You ain't seen him lately?"

"Well, I guess so," was the answer. "He's meat-hunter for the gang at Whisky Falls. One of their favorite jokes up there is to tie a fellow to a tree, stand a bottle of beer on his head, and have Curly Joe—Twisted Joe, they call him now—break it at two hundred yards. When the beer comes running down the fellow's face they all holler: 'Oh, too bad. Right through the head; watch him bleed.' Some faint dead away, thinking they been killed."

CHAPTER XVI

BOSS FOR A NIGHT

"WHEE-YEW!" Whitey Jack whistled loudly. "Now, let me tell you something, lumber-jacks, if Curly Joe's one of that gang up at the Falls, and if they really got nerve enough to buck Wolf John if he starts logging King Pines, Wolf John had better make sure Curly ain't within half a mile of him when the fight starts or there'll be a funeral down to Peabody Point just as sure's a gun's iron."

"Ah! Joe ain't got no nerve left to buck the old man."

"Not face to face, no! But a hundred or two hundred rods away, laying behind a wind-fall, looking over the sights of a 30-40, that's just deer-shooting for a man like Curly Joe."

"Yes; and if little old Nels should get his sights on Curly 'bout that time——"

"Ah-h-h!" The listeners growled enthusiastically at the picture called up by this suggestion.

"There'd be something to talk about, lumber-jacks; Curly Joe and old Nels turned loose in the timber hunting each other! And it would all be settled with one shot."

They now began an argument over the problem of who might be returned the winner in such a grim contest, debating seriously the respective woodsmanship of the two men, the disadvantage under which Curly Joe laboured through being crippled, and the advantage he possessed

in using the highpower 30-40 rifle with its superiority of range over Nels' 45-90.

A month before John would have considered their conversation monstrous and barbaric, or have thought it impossible outside of freakish fiction or melodrama. Now he had partaken of the grimness of the Big Woods and the stern blood-talk of the men fell as naturally on his ears as the cruel whoosh of the north wind in the pine boughs.

It was all part of the game as it was played here in the North: when the test came men held their lives and souls together by the bare strength of arm and heart that had been given them, without the aid of law or other sheltering devices of civilisation. Man to man; man to Nature—the old primal, eternal arrangement. The law of Fight. Wherefore, in the woods, wise men kept themselves clean of besmirching action, lest in the ultimate test their souls fail to stead them, strong and unafraid.

The argument was interrupted by the entrance of the red-headed Dugan.

"They're starting to come back from the Falls," he said with a grin. "Pat McCooey just came staggering into the cook-shack begging for black coffee. His eyes are blacked like he'd been kicked by a mule. Oh, we'll have a fine collection of snake-charmers here to-night all right."

"I don't understand it," said Brackett, seriously. "Wolf John knows what Christmas night is in camp, and here he sends for Bart to come down to the Point, and the straw-boss off on a bat. I wonder if Bart's coming back to-night. If he don't, there'll be trouble in camp before morning."

Norby, the Norwegian, leaned his arms on the window-sill and stood looking out, placidly puffing his pipe. Out of the timber and across the open, whitened space before the bunk-house came weaving two huge figures, arm in

arm, shouting, cursing, laughing at the top of their bull-like voices. Straight to the door of the bunk-house they came, lurching into the room, leaving the door wide open behind them.

"Hello, you —— —— white-livered, camp-meeting —— — ——!" roared the biggest of the pair. "Stay at home; save your money, you poor high-bankers! Ain't men enough to go out and drink like men."

"But they're goin' tuh drink now!" bellowed his companion, drawing a quart bottle of whisky from his mackinaw. "Here, you weak sports, drink that up or I'll make you eat the bottle."

Even as he waved the bottle above his head Norby had moved silently from the window to a position behind them. Brackett and Whitey Jack rose slowly from their bunks. Suddenly Norby's thick arms licked around the necks of the two drunken men, pulling their heads back, throttling them. Brackett and Whitey Jack, diving forward, each caught a pair of unsteady legs to their bosoms. There was a sudden rush of feet, a jam in the doorway; then the two noisy ones were lying bewildered in the snow and Norby was smashing the whisky bottle against the bunk-house walls.

"Yes, that's all right for one or two," grumbled Burns, "but how about it when two, three dozen of 'em come piling in like that?" He touched the bandage on his head. "I wouldn't move a finger to stop 'em. Let 'em tear the camp to pieces. It's Bart's job; I wouldn't sweat myself saving his camp for him."

"Neither will I," said Norby, "but I will smash every whisky bottle shoved under my nose; that's all I will do."

"It'd serve Bart right if they stole the teams on him," grumbled the injured man. "Yes, I hope they clean out the whole stables."

"Oh, I guess they won't be that bad," said Brackett. "Remember last Christmas?"

"Sure."

"They set fire to the hay-barn that night—and Bart was here."

"It's a funny trick," agreed Norby. "It ain't like Wolf John to leave Main Camp without a boss Christmas Night."

"Well, I for one won't do Bart's work if they get rough," said Brackett.

"Me neither; me neither," chimed in other men.

"They ain't going to rip the bunk-house up," put in Whitey Jack. "We'll take care of that, because we want to sleep here. But they can take the rest of the camp to pieces for all of me."

John looked out of the window. Half a dozen whisky-maddened lumber-jacks were staggering out of the timber, yelling and laughing. Main Camp was without a boss to protect it against the insane whims of the men who had been to Whisky Falls.

As the swift darkness drew near, the celebrators came stumbling into camp in droves. Despite the thirty-below-zero weather they came with mackinaws open at the throat, many of them bare-headed, more with unmittened hands.

Bobcats and wolves lay snug in the depths of their caves that night, the deer, yarding in the hearts of dense cedar swamps, huddled flank to shoulder to keep warm; but the drink-inflamed woodsmen exposed themselves recklessly, neither heeding the dangers they ran nor suffering the slightest frost-bite from their carelessness. The providence which guards the drunken man was with them in a generous mood, for sober men suffered frost-bites by the score and even dropped on the road during that slow, staggering return from the celebration at Whisky Falls.

There was no Bart to meet them in the camp clearing, to search them for whisky and smash their bottles against

the stumps. They brought their whisky in undisturbed. Bart wasn't in camp, the word went around; the straw-boss wasn't in camp; nobody was in camp who had a single —— thing to say. As the significance of this information seeped into their muddled brains the drunken crew gave one wild whoop, and proceeded to turn the camp into a maudlin hell.

The cook-shack was their first point of attack, for not even the grewsome quantities of bad liquor in their systems could still the frost-shot bodies' natural cry for food. The fat cook came puffing over to the bunk-house.

"What'll I do, what'll I do?" he spluttered. "The wild Injuns! They're raving; they're crazy! They'll wreck the shack if they don't get food right away and Bart's orders is to feed nobody between meals. What'll I do? It's my job against the shack. Hey, somebody, tell me what'll I do?"

The men laughed. There is always a feud between the hard-worked lumber-jacks and the soft-lying camp "doctor."

"By ——! It's serious, I tell you. If they start going, there won't be any cook-shack left to get breakfast in in the morning. What am I going to do?"

"Feed them," said John suddenly. It was out before he had time to think of the consequences of his utterance. Every man in the room turned and looked at him, as if they had been waiting for him to speak. He had forgotten the popularity, approaching leadership, which he had acquired in the camp, and had spoken only as seemed natural to the situation.

Now he saw what he had done. With two words he had assumed the leadership which the sober men had been waiting for. Without a leader they would not move, and none of them wished to assume the leadership. They were relieved that some one would accept

the responsibility of being boss, and John saw plainly that they had been hoping, even expecting, that he would do it.

"But Bart's orders?" whined the cook.

John knew it was no time to falter or quibble after having taken the first step.

"You say they'd wreck the cook-shack. Are you sure they would go that far?"

"Come and look at 'em!" The cook waved his fat arms. "They'd do it in a minute."

"Well, we can't have the kitchen put out of business —even if you've got Bart's orders. Go ahead; feed them. It's the only thing to do."

"But suppose Bart——"

The oily servility of the cook irritated John.

"Feed 'em!" he said shortly; and the cook disappeared.

John looked around the room. And a new, deep thrill shot along his spine—the thrill that comes once in a lifetime to a man, the thrill of for the first time seeing strong men look up to him as their leader.

"We'll back you up, Mud," said Brackett.

Other men nodded.

"Somebody had to say the word," supplemented Norby. "The camp had to have a boss."

The hot food which the cook and Dugan hurriedly hurled before the ravening crowd in the cook-shack lulled the storm for the time being. On some the food and warmth had its effect after the long walk in the cold air and they came stumbling drowsily to their bunks in the bunk-house.

Norby, Brackett, Whitey Jack and the other sober men waited until they slept, then skilfully stole the bottles from their pockets and smashed them against the log walls outside. But the stronger men took on new life with their meal. It mattered not to them that they had

been up all the night before, that their blood was poisoned with the vilest concoctions ever masquerading under the label of whisky, that they had staggered six miles through a stinging cold. As their systems began to absorb nourishment the desire for more excitement, more play, more alcohol came back on them. They began to sing and drink. Soon their whisky was gone.

"Holy, red-roaring, jumping Ju-peeter!" cried one. "Every man still on his feet and not a drop of liquor in camp! Boys, it's back to the Falls for me. Who comes along?"

"Horses, horses, horses!" shrieked another. "Who said we was slaves? Who's going to walk when there's forty head o' horseflesh eating their heads off in those stables? Horses! We'll use the horses!"

At this, Dugan hastily slipped out and ran to the bunk-house.

"They're going to the stables," he gasped. "French Jimmy just thought of the horses, and they're fixing it up to go back to the Falls. There they go! They're going to the stables now!"

John walked slowly to the window and looked out. Within he was seething with excitement, even with apprehension that approached fear, but he betrayed it no more than would the hardiest old river-hog in the crew.

From the door of the cook-shack, across the open space before it, there was a ragged line of hurrying men, reaching almost to the stables. They were staggering and shouting demoniacally their demand for horses and sleighs. As John looked, old Lavin, a stableman, came to the door of the stables. The instant he saw the line he realised what was coming and slammed shut the door.

The first man in the line, the man called French Jimmy, picked up a heavy peavy and hurled his weight behind it against the door. The door cracked open.

Quick hands reached forth and tore it to pieces. French Jimmy, leaping inside, dragged forth old Lavin and threw him to one side as if he had been a boy of ten.

Then the gang swarmed into the stables, and then John, without a word, without asking or thinking of asking any one to follow him, dashed out of the bunk-house, across the clearing and hurled himself like a bolt through the crowd choking the stable door.

Norby, Brackett, Davis, Burns, Whitey Jack, and a dozen others followed, as men follow the man they have selected as their leader. They came, a flying wedge of quick, sober men, ere the drunken mob had time to sense what was happening. In the same moment that John, meeting French Jimmy leading out a team, was knocking his man down, the men behind him were throwing the drunks out of the stable, away from the door, clearing the field with the unexpectedness and force of their rush.

As John knocked down a second man, Burns and Whitey Jack came in and methodically threw his victims out into the snow. Then the drink-maddened crew, slowly gathering what had happened to them, realising painfully that they had been man-handled and whipped, recoiled for a moment, formed into a compact body, and with a devil's mob-yell came like one man for the stables.

It was no child's play now. Drunk though the assailants were, they were still men who could hold their own any place in the world in a rough and tumble. Men were knocked clear from the ground, landing on their shoulders and coming upright again as if on strings. In the first onslaught John saw the gigantic Burns toss a man over his head, heard the man's bones creak as he struck the frozen ground and to his amazement saw him spring up and reënter the fight.

"Rush 'em!" he cried, and taking advantage of the

lull in the attack the sober men rushed forward in a body, scattering the would-be horse-thieves to the four winds, driving them back, and in the end chasing them into the timber in a complete rout.

"Brackett, Whitey Jack, Burns, Norby—you stay with me and guard the stables to-night," said John. "Some of the others"—he called out half a dozen names—"go and sleep in the cook-shack. The rest of you go back to the bunk-house and see that nothing starts there."

"How about me?" protested Davis, the teamster. "I belong with the horses."

"Five of us is enough here," said John sharply. "The rest of you do as I've told you."

They obeyed. He knew they would obey before he spoke. He felt it; it was in his bones, in the way the men looked at him, in the way they had fought at his back.

"By golly!" snickered Norby, sticking an ear back in place, "I don't think Bull Bart could have done it any better."

All the night John and his men in the stables kept order in Main Camp. All night long John was on his feet, suppressing fresh attacks on the stables before they were fully born, hauling sodden lumber-jacks from beds in the snow to their bunks, watching them all so that they did themselves nor any one else harm, and he wondered greatly that he should have handled the situation successfully.

Bart came driving into camp with the cold greying of dawn. He was humming a tune, and was in a merry, triumphant humour that contrasted strangely with the threatening mood of the morning before. Self-satisfaction and serene confidence showed plainly in his eyes.

"Hello, Mud!" he cried, as John met him at the stables. "Where did you get that smash in the jaw?"

John told him briefly how the men had come back from Whisky Falls.

"And you stalled 'em, did you, Mud?" laughed Bart. "Well, well! You'll be a man if you keep on, Mud; yes, sir, you'll be a real he-man some day and I'll give you a job as straw-boss in one of my camps."

He stamped stiffly away toward the cook-shack, laughing and humming happily.

John looked after him dubiously. He could think of but one thing which could have wrought such a change in Bart; and as the picture of Belle rose up before his eyes he became conscious of a cold, numbing fear creeping over his heart.

CHAPTER XVII

"MUD NO MORE"

TO John's surprise Bart, in the next two days, made no sign of fulfilling his threat that Main Camp would be an unhealthy place for one John Mud. The foreman apparently was in too good a humour to remember his unpleasant intentions toward John. He went about his duties with a smile on his lips, humming a tune, and with a look of triumph in his bright eyes. The bitter lines about his mouth and the troubled frown on his brows had vanished. He was like a man who sees his plans succeed after a doubtful struggle, and John reasoned that it must have been during Bart's trip to Home Camp—where he would have seen Belle—that this success must have been achieved.

Main Camp was on the last week of the work assigned to it, and Bart, despite his exuberance and good humour, apparently was determined that the job should wind up with a record-breaking output. John had been surprised at Bart's energy from the first, now he was amazed. The man became a thunderbolt in boots. As Dugan, the cookee, put it: "He was everywhere all the time." He kept Main Camp's crew literally on the jump from daylight until dark. Thoroughly hated though he was by probably fifty per cent. of the crew, Bart now demonstrated how thoroughly he was the master of his men and how well justified was Wolf John's dependence upon him.

Under his electric driving the crew swept upon the re-

maining timber like farmers upon standing grain. The big Norways, white pine and hemlocks fell like wheat before the sickle. In the woods there was the constant, *Whoosh,*—"Look out!" and cannon-like crackle that told of another forest giant thumping in the snow; on the ice-roads there was cursing and straining of logging-chains as the teamsters vied with each other in moving record loads; and on the roll-ways there was all day the steady, dull *boom-boom-boom* of logs rolling down to their berths on the ice-covered river.

"The —— —— ——!" confided Brackett to John admiringly. "He makes all other walking-bosses look like kids when it comes to getting out the timber."

So well did Bart drive his capable crew that on the fourth day after Christmas the men knew that the morrow would see the clean-up of Main Camp's timber. Which, they reminded each other, would see Wolf John in camp, it being his custom to be with his men whenever work was started or completed on a job.

At one o'clock the next day, a Thursday, the men came trooping in from the woods to the cook-shack with their work done. Bart had saved his hardest whip for the last day, and before the men were allowed to go to their noon meal they had completed what ordinarily would have been a full day's work. As they bent ravenously over their food in the cook-shack, the door opened and, looking up, they saw Wolf John Peabody himself standing looking at them with appreciative eyes.

"Good work, boys!" boomed his great voice. "When we started the job here I figured that you'd be knocking the last of 'em down the end of this week. You beat my guess by two days. Cookee, set me a plate here. I'm hungry enough to eat you if you don't hustle!"

A pleased grumble ran around the table. That was like the old man: he was a hard driver, but he gave you credit when you did the right thing; he was rich

enough to travel with the big bugs, but he didn't feel that he was too good to sit down and eat with the boys.

Dugan, so pleased and flustered that his face grew nearly as red as his hair, hurriedly ran to the pantry for a plate, stumbled over his own feet, dropped the plate, and finally succeeded in serving the Big Boss to the tune of uproarious laughter, in which Wolf John's voice rang loudest of all.

"Well, boys," said Peabody, when the clatter of rapid eating had died down, "this is the finish of Main Camp. We are through here. There will be no lay-off or cutting down of the crew. We are all going to stay on, who want to. Saturday, the day after the first, we are going to begin to move Main Camp—up into the King Pines."

He paused and looked down the table, first down one side then up the other, eyeing each man closely.

"I see some of you want to know about the row with these bums up at Whisky Falls," he continued. "To those I'll say this: you can get your time at the office this afternoon. That's all. The King Pines job will last well into the Spring. We'll start logging back from the river now while there's snow, and work toward the river.

"While the roads last we ought to get out all but a belt along the stream. We'll skid them to the water on the bare ground, and make up a late drive.

"The job will last until pretty close to low-water time, and there'll be mill-jobs all Summer for every man who stays through with us. Those who don't, the Peabody Logging Company will never be able to use again. Of course I know that most of you'll stay; the kind of boys who can knock the timber down the way you fellows have done here at Main Camp aren't the kind to turn high-bankers just because a few bums have shot off their mouths at the boss. If the Peabody Logging Com-

pany couldn't take care of itself, and of its men, it wouldn't be doing business as it is to-day."

The men laughed and cheered. Wolf John was the man who knew how to talk to the boys: he gave it to you straight from the shoulder, and you knew where you had him all the time. A number of men put their heads together and talked rapidly at the farther end of the table. Then the youngest of them spoke up, half-timidly, half-boldly, driven on by his friends.

"Say, Mr. Peabody—the boys says—they want to know —Mr. Peabody—we ain't going to wind up Main Camp without a dance, are we?"

"You bet we ain't, son!" responded Peabody instantly.

"Whoop-ee!" yelled the men.

"Did you ever know a Peabody camp to close without a dance?"

"You bet not!"

"The camp is yours, boys, for to-morrow—Friday—to do with as you please for a dance," continued the old man. "Of course you'll have to stand the expenses yourselves." This was a skilful touch, for he knew well that these men would have resented anybody's paying for their fun. "And, also, of course, you'll see to it that any outsiders don't bring in any liquor, I know that."

They nodded. If he had ordered, it might have been different; but Wolf John knew his men.

"And if you fellows don't have that bunk-house fit for the women-folks to dance in you can bet Miss Belle and the other women from the Point will have something to say to you when they show up."

For some reason John found himself moved to look at Bart when Belle's name was mentioned. Bart was smiling in a way that made John feel tight about the throat. He slipped away from the table and hurried to the office, where he sought to bury the memory of

Bart's tantalising smile in the work of compiling the final report on Main Camp's output. He had succeeded so well that he was quite ready to smash the smile against Bart's teeth if he appeared, when his uncle entered the office.

Old Peabody stood for a while looking down at the big figure bending uncomfortably over pen and paper. He saw how clumsily the pen sat in the big hand, how out of place John's thick shoulders seemed bent above a desk, and he laughed.

"John Peabody—Mud no more—that's no work for a man who can tame a camp on Christmas Day," said he. "That was a good job, John Peabody. What made you do it?"

"Do what?" said John quietly, though greatly pleased that he was "Mud no more."

"Show the booze-fighters that they couldn't take the camp to pieces even if the bosses were absent."

"Oh, that." John was embarrassed. "Why, there were your horses, and those drunken fellows were going to take them out and maybe drive them to death, and there was nobody else to take the lead in stopping them, so I couldn't hardly stand to one side and not try to do something."

The old man nodded.

"Did you stop to think that it was a mighty curious thing that the camp was left without a boss on that day?" he asked.

"Why, all the men spoke of it as a queer thing," replied John. "I supposed you didn't know that the straw-boss had gone or you wouldn't have sent for Bart to come down to the Point."

"Did you think that it was a curious thing for me to send you back here so suddenly, and to send for Bart to leave?" he asked, eyeing John closely. "Did you think that I might have some motive for doing that?"

"You said you wanted me to carry the message to Bart."

"And you didn't think"—the old man came closer and his eyes fairly searched John's thoughts—"while you were bucking those drunks you didn't think that maybe I'd done it to test you—and that it was up to you to do what you did?"

John sat up in amazement. Eye for eye he gave back his uncle's close scrutiny.

"No, sir," he said. "I never thought of that. Is that really why you did it?"

"To try you out, yes," grinned his uncle. "Hang it, John Peabody, wherever in the city did you pick up the knack of handling rough men? How did you make the sober men come and fight at your back?"

"I didn't make them," said John stoutly. "They're fine fellows, they're bricks! When they saw that I didn't have any chance against the bunch of drunks in the stable——"

"What!" The old man had him by the shoulders. "Do you mean to say you rushed that devil's gang alone?"

"I lost my head," confessed John in confusion. "It was a foolish thing to do, I know."

"Humph!" Wolf John's brow brewed storm clouds. "Bart didn't tell me that. He said you sent the men. Well, go on."

"Oh, nothing else. The men, the sober men—bricks, every one of them—came piling in, and they did the work, of course."

For many seconds old Peabody sat lost in thought, his eyes on the floor. Finally he met his nephew's even gaze.

"Bart never lied to me before, that I know of," he said slowly. "Perhaps he got it wrong from one of the men.

"Well"—the frown vanished and he looked up—"it was a risky trick to play on you, nephew, and I promise you it won't happen again. But I had to find out if you were the real thing, and Christmas Day offered the chance. In the meantime, have a good time at the dance to-morrow night.

"There'll be a different sort of one Saturday, if those Whisky Fallers have got nerve enough to make a showdown. We'll move what we need of this camp up there on sleighs.

"We ought to take it down, move it, and have it set up by Monday night. I will stay on the job until I see that done. Against the doctor's orders, I know, and Belle will scold. But I can't rest until I see with my own eyes that the fight against Jim Lowrey is started."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DANCE

THE gods in control of Winter weather were kind to the men of Main Camp and to their dance. For, while the days and nights since the coming of the cold spell on Christmas Eve had been too bitterly cold to permit of successful social diversions even to the hardened woods-people, Friday morning opened with a softness in the air that presaged coming mildness, and by nightfall the thermometer had risen until it hovered comfortably around twenty above—"one-shirt" weather, as the old-timers called it.

The men had outdone themselves in preparation for the event. In the first place, after a council of war, they had decided that as the bunk-house was to be torn down and moved next day, they had no more need for the bunks that cluttered the four walls, the cook-shack and the stables being sufficient sleeping accommodations for those too weak and decrepit to stay up a whole night.

Accordingly they had torn out the bunks to the last board, thereby doubling the dancing-floor of the room. Around the walls had been placed a row of chairs and benches. The walls themselves and the ceiling were literally hidden beneath a covering of pine boughs, cunningly interlaced with a few buck's-heads, bear-hides and wolf-pelts hung here and there to make—as the artist responsible put it—the place "look purty and homelike."

Huge tubs of boiling water from the cook-shack, many

bars of soap, and a dozen scrub-brushes muscularly wielded, had made the rough floor astonishingly clean; and all the lanterns and wall-lamps that could be begged, borrowed, bought or stolen were in place to make the room a blaze of light.

But it was on the orchestra that the men had done themselves proud. The ordinary orchestra of a woods dance, the men had decided, would not suffice for this much-to-be-talked-of celebration. They must have something special. Wherefore they had persuaded the mill superintendent's wife at Peabody Point to loan them her piano and had tenderly hauled it out to Main Camp and mounted it in a post of honour on the musician's platform at the farther end of the room.

"We'll show a lot of high-bankers what a dance is like when this camp sets out to have one," summed up Whitey Jack. "That's the first pea-annie ever been seen at a camp dance from Quebec to Moose Jaw."

The men were prouder of the piano than of the amazing logging feats they had performed in the last four days of the camp's operation.

Bart watched the preparations for the gala event with a tolerant smile. His suddenly acquired cheerfulness and self-satisfaction were growing with every hour. He even treated John with a careless heartiness that indicated that for some reason he had decided that he had nothing to fear from him. He walked the earth now as if he had nothing to fear from any man, as if his plans were triumphant, and the sight of him filled John with wonder and fears.

His fears were increased when, on the morning of the dance, Bart, fresh shaven, dressed in new raiment from shoes to cap, with a costly bearskin coat over his arm, stepped into his cutter and drove gaily off toward Peabody Point. There was no business reason for his going, and there was only one other reason that John could

imagine, and that was that he was going to drive Belle out to the dance.

John thought of the poor woman he had picked up in the road Christmas Eve, and of the bruises that Bart's hard hands had made on her pale face. Then he thought of Belle sitting beside this man on the long ride over the silent tote-road. Belle did not know that side of Bart's nature indicated by the bruised face of the woman from Whisky Falls; and Bart was a masterful man with an undeniable fascination for women.

"Hey, you, Mud!" It was Dugan who, from the cook-shack door, called John from his gloomy thoughts. "You're third next in the barber-shop. Hurry up, get aboard and get that brush scraped off your phiz for fifteen cents. Come on; no shrubbery allowed is my orders."

Dugan, being clean and skilful with scissors and razor, had turned one corner of the cook-shack into an impromptu barber-shop, and—for a price—was doing his share of making the men presentable for the dance. Norby was occupying the chair as John entered and took his seat in the waiting row and Dugan was expatiating on the toughness of the Norwegian's beard.

"They don't grow 'em that way in this country," said the cookee. "They have hair on their faces here; that ain't hair you got, Norby; them's wires."

"Cut them off, boy, and cut them good," warned Norby placidly. "I'm a good-looking man when I'm dressed up and I learned to dance all the way from Tokyo to the Barbary Coast. You give me a clean shave—Ough!"

Dugan had skilfully spilled a cup of water down his victim's spine and ducked quickly the blow that followed.

"It's too bad you're red-headed, Dugan," condoled one of the waiting men. "There's going to be some Swede girls over from the Swede settlement, and if you wasn't

red-headed you might get a dance. But they run from red-heads, them yellow-haired ones do."

"Ho! Easy mark!" Dugan brandished his razor maliciously. "Trying to kid me, and me going to shave you. I pity your looks when I get through with you, boy."

In another corner of the room Whitey Jack was cutting hair. A young French Canadian was stepping into his chair.

"Fare, please," said Jack, holding out his hand.

"Ah ha! You teenk I pay, den you no cut mah hair, eh?" said the Canuck. "*Sacre,* no, mess-taire! You cut, den I pay."

"Just as you please, son." Jack ran his clipper straight through the thick thatch on the man's head. "Twenty-five cents, please," said he pleasantly. "You teenk I cut, den mebbe you no pay, eh? No, Canuck. You pony up now or go as you are."

"Give him to me when you're through with him, Jack," begged Dugan. "Canucks are so tight with their money it's the duty of us civilised folks to rob 'em."

"Yessir," said Whitey Jack, snipping skin and hair indiscriminately from the Canadian's skull. "A Canuck don't think any more of a quarter than he does of his old mother's right eye."

The Canadian was silent until, his hair-cut finished, he stood in the doorway ready to go.

"You smart man, Jack," he said, smiling. "Tak' good look at dat quarter an' see what she's lak." Then he went out swiftly.

"The son-of-a-gun!" bellowed Jack, looking at the coin. "It's one of them big, old cents silvered over!"

All over the camp men were shaving, being shaved, having their hair cut, and otherwise preparing their persons for the dance. As evening drew on they began

to array themselves in their gala attire. The sudden flare of colours from the bottom of the men's "war-bags" was a revelation to John.

Bright red woolen shirts were the most desired. Lacking this, the checked red and green "hickory" shirt was a favourite. Next came brightly coloured sashes, tied tightly around the waist, the tasseled ends drooping carelessly on the left hip. A Chippewa half-breed arrayed himself in tasseled buck-skin from head to foot, and the young men of the camp were ready to slay him out of sheer masculine jealousy.

A couple of French Canadians appeared with knives in their sashes to lend dash to their appearance, and they were promptly informed that if those knives didn't go back into their war-bags they wouldn't even be allowed to listen to the music. The informants, moreover, seemed able to back up their order, so the cutlery disappeared.

Dugan, the redness of his shirt exceeding only that of his hair, his sash as gorgeous as ever graced a French *voyageur's* waist, could not understand John's taste in arraying himself in a modest blue serge and plain white shirt.

"This is a dance, friend," he said, "not a funeral. How do you expect the girls' eyes to light up if you don't give 'em something to look at? Cheer up! Here they come."

Down the tote-road, in the complete silence of the soft evening, Dugan's sharp ears had detected the faint tinkle of sleigh-bells. Nearer and nearer the pretty tinkle came. There was a procession of sleighs and cutters.

Soon the laughter of women could be heard, rendered incredibly sweet and welcome by the sternness of the woods, and one laugh there was among them, soft and silvery, yet free, which reached into John's bosom and

tugged at his heart-strings, filling him with many troubled emotions.

Then the sleighs burst out of the timber into the camp-clearing, and the rest was confusion as the men tumbled joyously forth with insistent welcome.

CHAPTER XIX

BART CEASES TO SMILE

BART drove in the lead, with Belle at his side. Beneath the light of the big lantern before the bunk-house door John saw that Bart's smile was more triumphant, more offensive to him than ever.

Belle was smiling, laughing, talking, calling greetings, humming, as if the fount of young life within her were bubbling up too strongly to be controlled. As she leaped from the sleigh and sprang lightly on to the dance-floor, she threw back the light shawl from her head; and then for the time being the light of the world went out for John Peabody. For Belle's great mass of dark hair was drawn back from her forehead, the heavy tresses falling in a cloud down her shoulders. And on her head gleamed triumphantly the ancient Indian head-band which Bart had attempted to present to her on the day of John's arrival at Peabody Point.

At the end of the procession Wolf John rode alone with Nels. With four or five other old men he repaired to the cook-shack, where a game of poker consoled them for being too old to dance.

The music struck up instantly with the arrival of the visitors. Belle looked around as if searching for some one, and John's heart leaped as he saw her relief when her eyes fell upon his face. She ran lightly across the room to where he stood eyeing her gloomily. Bart frowned as he noted her action, then with a short laugh he followed leisurely after.

"Mr. Mud, what are you trying to do; hide from me?" laughed Belle, shaking John's hand. "I was afraid at first you weren't here. Come; is anything wrong? You don't look quite as happy as the rest of the men."

She came close up to him, looking him frankly in the eyes, the glorious young womanhood of her enveloping him like a flood. A month ago he would have mouthed some inane excuse for his unaccustomed lack of spirits, have changed the subject and led the conversation into the parrot-like chatter with which the polite world keeps vital things from being mentioned. He did nothing of the sort now, for already he was a different man. His big brows lowered even more blackly as he looked directly at her. Belle recoiled a trifle from his look; she was surprised that he could look so fierce.

"It hurts me to see you wearing that head-band—from Mr. Bart," he said quietly, and marched stolidly past her toward the door.

In the doorway he turned and saw Bart claiming her for the first dance, but he saw also that she was looking absently toward the doorway, her eyes large with surprise.

Out under the starlit sky John bared his head and stood with the evening chill upon his brow. A slight breeze was stirring the boughs of the few pines left standing about camp, but to-night John seemed to hear their gentle whispering as a dirge. Why had he spoken so? Why had he let her see how he had been hurt? What was he to her, anyhow? Nothing but an employee of Wolf John's, named Mud.

Dugan, the garishly dressed, came by, on his arm a laughing round-cheeked lass with two yellow braids down her back.

"Hey, Mud! Look at me," he called. "They said none of them Swedes would dance with a red-head, and

here Hulda's going to dance with me all night, ain't you, Hulda?"

"Frash t'ing!" giggled the girl, striking his red head vigorously.

In the hall the waltz music was playing, and the feet were gliding noisily on the rough floor. John felt lonesome. He moved farther from the bunk-house. Other men came by and called to him. There was only one place in the camp that would be deserted and properly lonely on a night like this, and that was the little office.

John stalked moodily into the office, made his way behind the desk in the corner, and there in the darkness he dropped his arms on the desk and his face upon his arms, the first great pain of his life stabbing and wrenching at his heart.

It was a turning-point in his life, and those dark, anguished moments helped the boy to become a man.

How long he sat thus behind the desk John did not know. He was lost in the maze of the thoughts that were surging through his mind. Though he had left the office-door open, and the music, the laughter, the merriment of the camp came tinkling in, John did not hear. So lost in his thoughts was he that he did not hear the footsteps on the steps, or on the office floor, and did not know that two people had stepped inside the door until he heard their voices.

And when he heard them he was frozen helpless. He could not decide whether to call out, to make a noise; and so he came to play the part of eaves-dropper to Bart and Belle. Bart, too, had realised that the office was the one place in which to be undisturbed to-night.

Bart was speaking, low and passionately, as the pair came through the doorway. So near as John could determine in the dark, Belle was standing directly before the desk on which his head was resting and Bart was standing in the doorway.

"Well, Belle?" Bart's voice was brisk, confident, domineering. "You know why I asked you to come here. It's time we had a definite understanding. When is it going to be?"

There was a moment of silence, and John, scarcely breathing, forgot that he was in the position of an eavesdropper, forgot everything in his fear of what Belle's reply might be.

"Why do you ask that to-night, Bart?" said Belle evenly.

"Because it's time to have it settled. To-morrow we start on the King Pines job, and I want a definite promise from you as to when we are to be married. When's it going to be?"

Another silence. John could feel that Belle trembled as she placed her hand upon the desk above his head. Then she grew quiet.

"Bart, I am glad you did ask me to come here; I am glad you have decided that it is time for an understanding," she said, and her voice was quite calm. "I am sure of myself now. I don't love you, Bart; I know it now. I won't marry you—ever!"

It was a long time before Bart spoke. Then his voice was low and sinister with the same deadly menace in it as when he had threatened John on Christmas Eve.

"Belle, do you think I am the sort of man who may be played with safely?"

"No. And I haven't played with you, Bart. Do you think I am the sort to play with anything like this?"

"What do you call this? Do you think it is clever to play the flirt? What do you mean by it?"

"By what, Bart?"

"By saying you won't marry me, when I ask you to name the date?"

"I mean," said Belle, "that I now know myself and

my feelings better than I ever have in my life. I mean just what I say: I know now that I can not marry you ever."

"What!" His voice though low was like the roar of some enraged animal. "Do you think I am going to take that answer? Do you think I am the man to be fooled with like this?"

John heard him moving, cat-footed, across the floor towards her.

"You come here wearing that head-band to-night when you knew I would be expecting your answer. You lead me along; you make me feel sure that you will give me your word; and then—no! Try that with boys!"

He was standing close to her. Suddenly he reached forward and gripped her wrists.

"I won't have it, do you hear? You are going to marry me; you are, you are! I want you. I never wanted anything yet that I didn't get. You won't be an exception. Make up your mind to it; you're going to be my wife. I won't let anything stop me, not anything. Do you hear that? I never let anything stop me when I want something like I want you, not anything! Not even your own foolish thought of the moment that you can not marry me.

"Can not? You must! You've led me on too far. You can't go back on me now. I won't let you. Belle—Belle! Don't dare to play with me. You don't know what I can do if you try that. You care for me. You would not have led me on as you have, if you didn't. This is only a foolish whim of yours. It isn't going to make any difference in the end. I want your promise, and I want it to-night—now."

In the darkness John raised his head and gripped the edges of the desk in preparation for revealing his presence. Belle spoke calmly, but with a note of fearless command in her voice.

"Let go of my wrists, Bart. Go back to the door, or I shall leave you."

He laughed softly.

"How are you going to do it? Can you free yourself if I wish to hold you? Eh? Can you tear yourself away from me? No, you can't. Not any more than you can keep from becoming my wife."

"Now I know you, Bart," said Belle. "I suspected that this was all there was to you; just the dominant brute—now I know it. I am not a squaw; you will please release my wrists."

"You think——"

"Release my wrists."

Another moment of absolute silence; then the sound of Bart's feet moving back to the door, while John sat in awe at the fearlessness, the calmness, and the triumph of Belle.

"And I suppose——" Bart's voice was low and deadly again—"that you fancy this is all there is to it: just your own sweet will, eh? Oh, no! You'll find that my will is the one that will settle this matter. It has settled it. It settled it when you began to encourage me. I said then that you were going to be my wife, and you are."

"I'm glad that you've shown your real self to me at last, Bart," said Belle, with a ring in her voice. "I knew it was in you. You're strong, but that's all. And you can not make me care for you that way, and there is no man in the world can make me marry him unless I care for him. You were the only young man I knew, the only one I saw and talked to. You're big and strong; you attracted me. I didn't encourage you; it was your own insistence. You continued to come, to call on me, to try to see me at every opportunity.

"When you asked me to marry you last Fall I told you that I didn't know if I cared for you. That was

the truth. When you asked me Thanksgiving Day I told you the same. It was the truth then, also. I admired you; you were so big and strong, and besides you were the only man I knew, practically. I told you then if I ever found that I cared for you enough I would come to you—and nothing could have stopped me. But I never really cared for you, Bart.

"I know it now. My eyes seem to have opened recently, and I begin to understand you. I believe the stories people have told about you—about other women. I didn't believe them before. Now I see how—how different you are from what a fine man should be—from what the man must be whom I can learn to care for. I am sorry if you are hurt, Bart, but—you ended it all when you took hold of my wrists in that woman-bullying way."

"All right." Bart's tone was openly threatening. "You've had your say, now I'll have mine. I'll tell you a little secret about your uncle. He isn't going to live much longer. His heart is gone. He may drop any day. When he goes I'll be the Boss Man in this neck of the woods. It's a long road from the Point down to Black Bear Lake, and I've got plenty of friends who would do anything for me—anything. Do you understand, Miss Belle? In the end—you will be glad to have me for a husband."

The desk on which John was leaning shook as Belle leaned against it, all but collapsing before his brutal announcement.

"What—what do you say?" she whispered. "Uncle John—my Uncle John—is not well?"

Bart sneered.

"Kind of takes the confidence out of you, don't it? Don't feel quite so big when there's a prospect of being left without Wolf John to take care of you, eh?"

"You're not—telling the truth, Bart," she stammered.

"You're trying to scare me. Say you're only trying to scare me—please!"

"Ask him—if you want to kill him. He's hanging by such a thin thread that the shock of learning that you knew probably'd be enough to bump him off."

"You brute! Oh, Bart, what a brute you are!"

"Brute?" He laughed loudly. He no longer made any attempt at keeping any chance passer-by from hearing. "Oh, no, not a brute. Just a man who's got nerve enough to take what he wants. And before I'm through you'll be glad to have that kind of a man for your husband."

He turned and went out. In the little office it was very still for a moment! Then Belle broke into stifled sobs that seemed to wrench her whole being. It was more than John could stand.

"Miss Peabody," he said, rising.

"Oh! Who is it? Who is there?"

"It's I—Mud. I couldn't help it. I came here to be alone. I didn't have any chance to let you know I was here until you'd begun to talk. And then I forgot all about being an eaves-dropper. You won't forgive me, I suppose, but—but please don't take it so hard."

"Did you hear what he said?" she whispered. "That Uncle John—is it true? Mr. Mud, do you know if it is true?"

His silence answered her.

"Oh, poor dear Uncle John!" she cried in anguish.

"Don't," he begged. "Please don't. It—it isn't as bad as Bart said. At least, I don't think so."

He told her all that Wolf John had told him about the heart-specialist's report. She heard him in silence, and after a moment she had herself under control.

"Did Uncle John say he didn't wish me to know?" she asked.

"Above all things he didn't wish you to know," said

John. "I don't believe I'd let him know it, Miss Peabody. It would hurt him terribly."

"I won't," she said. "Dear Uncle John! That's like him: always thinking of me. And now—what can I do to repay him for a little of his kindness to me?"

"I think you can best repay him by continuing to be yourself. I think the thing that he wishes above all is to see you going on as you have been, happy and cheerful, and as if you knew nothing about his condition. You—we must do what we can to make things as easy as possible for him, you know."

Belle held out her hand to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Mud, for saying that. I—I'll try to do my share."

"Will you also try to forgive me for sitting here without letting you know I was here while Bart and you were talking?"

She was in the doorway now and she stopped and looked up at him, her face luminous in the outside light.

"Forgive you?" she said. "I'm glad you were there. I'm glad you heard it—all of it. You—you're so different from Bart."

With that she hurried back toward the dance-hall, fearful that her absence might be remarked. As John looked after her he was sensible that something like a heavy weight had been lifted from his heart. In place of his depression there was a feeling of elation. He felt a boyish inclination to shout. His fears had all been false. Belle had not fallen under the spell of Bart's domination.

In the bunk-house he heard the music die down and the sound of dancing cease. In a few minutes another dance would be started; and Belle would hardly be dancing that dance with Bart. Determined to have the next dance himself, he hurried out of the office toward

the bunk-house. Half-way he met the impetuous Dugan, who was scurrying around, the blonde Hulda tucked securely on to his arm.

"Hey, you, Mud; where you been?" he demanded. "Been looking all over camp for you. Wolf John wants you. Come on now. He's in the dance-hall and he sends me out to hunt you up and bring you there. Come on!"

In the dance-hall a halt had been called on the dancing. The crowd was gathered about the raised platform at the end of the hall occupied by the musicians. John was surprised to note that the old men, who were not dancing, were present too. Nels, Norby, Whitey Jack, the mill-superintendent from Peabody Point, and other old men were up close to the platform on which John now saw that Wolf John was standing, looking over the crowd. At John's entrance the old man called out:

"There he is. Step right up here, you Mud. Right up here on the platform."

John obeyed. As he stepped up he observed Belle in the front row and saw that she was fulfilling her promise of being apparently happy and cheerful. Wolf John laid his big hand on his nephew's shoulder and addressed the crowd.

"Folks, I told you that I wanted to introduce to you a man. Here he is. Most of you know something about him. You know him as John Mud. That isn't his name. I gave him that name myself. I told him that his name was Mud until I knew what kind of stuff was in him.

"Now I know, as do most of the rest of you, so now we will all begin to call him by his right name, and recognise his new position. The Peabody Logging Company is going to take in a new partner. This is the man. Folks, this is my new partner, my nephew, Mr. John Peabody!"

While the crowd still stood, silent from surprise at this revelation, while broad smiles were beginning to spread over the faces of the men who had come to know John, while Dugan stood open-mouthed, Hulda still on his arm, and Belle cried out in delight, there came a bear-like growl from the outside of the circle, and Bull Bart came shouldering his way furiously through the crowd.

"So that's it, eh?" he roared when he stood before Wolf John. He looked the old man squarely in the eye, his big head thrust forward in its customary attitude of menace. "Tricked me, didn't you, Wolf John? Fooled me—just as this smart daughter of yours fooled me. Led me along, made me give you the best that was in me, and then spring this. D'you think that's safe, Peabody?"

"Easy, Bart," said the old man warningly. "Don't pull your sluice open too quick. You'd be in his shoes yourself by this time—if you hadn't dickered with Lowrey last Summer. Ah, ha! You thought I didn't know about that. Oh, yes; I knew all the time. I kept you on the payroll because you're the best walking-boss I ever had. I keep you still for that reason only."

Bart's neck and face seemed to swell with rage.

"The —— you do!" he exploded furiously. "You think you can keep me after this? You think you're big enough man to tell me what I'm going to do? Don't you know me better'n that? I dickered with Lowrey last Summer, yes. And I'm going to dicker with him again—now. Go ahead and log the King Pines. Let's see what kind of a walking-boss your sneaking nephew makes. And let's see what kind of a fight you can put up when you start bucking against men. I could have kept the gang up there quiet for you through Wah Song. But now I'll pay you for this night, Wolf John; you know me."

He turned to go, then stopped, looking over his shoulder at Belle. A sneer distorted his face.

"Well, well, Miss Big Bug! Not quite such a Big Bug now, eh? Not Wolf John's only heir, eh? Playing second fiddle now, ain't you? Well, well! Lucky for me I didn't marry you. But listen: I'm still the 'dominant brute' of this neck of the woods—and don't you forget it!"

Before a hand could be raised against him or a word spoken he was at the door.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Curly Joe, Wolf John?" he called derisively. "He's up at Whisky Falls. He'll be working under me beginning to-morrow."

And Bart vanished from Main Camp as silently and swiftly as a timber-wolf racing for its cave.

Behind him there was wide-eyed consternation. Wolf John stood staring grimly at the empty doorway. John stepped down from the platform and approached Belle.

"Will you dance this dance with me?" he whispered. As she nodded he turned to the musicians. "Here, you fellows, what are you doing—going to sleep? Start up a waltz. The dance goes on just the same."

The tension vanished. Men laughed and cheered. The music began. There was a scurrying for partners, and soon Main Camp was dancing away as merrily as if no interruption had occurred.

"Nels," said Wolf John presently, "you'll have to drive Miss Belle home to-night. I'm going to stay here at camp."

"No," said Nels quietly, "I don't drive her home; she can ride in one of the sleighs with the other women."

"What's that?"

"That's what I said," replied the little Norwegian stanchly. "If Curly Joe is at Whisky Falls under Bart, then Old Nels sticks close to you until this business is cleaned up."

CHAPTER XX

OLD NELS TAKES A TRICK

IT was well into the morning when John stood with the crew in the camp clearing and watched the last sleigh-load of dancers jingle merrily away towards Peabody Point. He stood and looked down the tote-road long after the sleigh had disappeared from view, long after the jingle of sleighbells came floating back to his ears. Belle was in that sleigh. She had gone. And that night he realised that Belle had come to mean so much to him that it was pain to part with her. He felt small and weak before the courage that she had shown on this night.

"We mustn't let Uncle John know that I know," she had whispered last of all; and throughout the evening she had smiled and danced and chattered until Wolf John had beamed in pleasure over her apparent happiness.

"Gee, Mud—I mean Mr. Peabody——" it was Dugan who was almost whispering at his side—"do you feel that way, too?"

"What way, you red-headed imp?" demanded John, coming out of his revery.

"Did you see Hulda when she left me?" Dugan was looking dreamily out on the road. "She—she's too good for me, I know that. I ain't—I ain't nothing compared to her. But, what d'you think, Mud—I mean Mr. Peabody—she says she'll marry me as soon's I'm a cook! Gee! Gimme a job cooking for some camp soon's you can, will you, Mr. Peabody?"

"I'll give you a clout in the ear if you come 'mistering' me, young fellow," laughed John, throwing an arm around the boy's shoulders. Then he grew grimly serious.

"Run and find where Wolf John's bunking, Dugan, and see if he's asleep. If he is, don't wake him. If he isn't, come and tell me, and I'll go see him."

Wolf John was not asleep. John found him as he was about to crawl into a bunk in Nels' quarters at the stables.

"Get 'em to bed, John," yawned the old man, a boot in his hand. "They'll only get two or three hours' sleep as it is."

"Why get them to bed at all?" said John.

"Huh?" Wolf John's grey brows came together, puzzled.

"That's what I came to see you about, Uncle John. The men are all keyed up after the dance. They're still larking around. They don't want to go to bed; they want more excitement. Why not give it to them? Let them start tearing camp down right away. I can start them. I know your plans. We'll start on the bunk-house. We'll have that down and on the sleighs by daylight. Have I your permission?"

Wolf John crawled into his bunk with the movements and sounds of an old bear bedding down in its lair.

"I don't believe you need anybody's permission, youngster," he grumbled. "You seem to have left the old man high and dry on the bank right at the jump."

John returned to the bunk-house where most of the men were cheering a friendly wrestling match between Dugan and Whitey Jack.

"Go on; heave him over your shoulder, Dugan: he said you was red-headed. Down him, Jack, down him; he's young enough to be your grandson. Shame on you, Red, for picking on such a kid."

As Whitey Jack saw John he laughingly let go.

"Boys, there's just one way to wind up a big night like this," said John. "Let's make it a good one; let's tear the old camp down right now."

The shout that greeted him told how well he had gauged the feelings of the men.

"Tear 'er down! Betcher life! Wind the night up right. Ro-oll out, lumber-jacks, and take the roof off her!"

With whoops and yells, like so many boy giants turned loose at rough play, they swarmed for lanterns, axes, peavies, cant-hooks. Some of the older men already had gone to bunk in the cook-shack and stables; others grumblingly went their way, now protesting that they had had enough foolishness for one night. But sixty men, the pick and youth of the camp, swarmed upon the bunk-house with tools in their hands.

Lanterns bobbed and winked about the scene. There was the noise of roof boards being ripped loose, of wall logs pried off and falling rumblingly upon the frozen ground, and the mighty "Yo, heave 'er!" of a score of men lifting the big timbers on to the waiting sleighs. When Main Camp went to breakfast that morning, there was only a bare spot and a pile of rubbish where the bunk-house had been—the house itself, in parts, was chained on a dozen big sleighs, waiting only the hooking-on of horses to start for its new location in the King Pines.

"It ain't logging," protested Whitey Jack. "No, sir; moving a camp in Winter ain't logging—but gee, she certainly did come down!"

Wolf John appeared, mittened and mackinawed, stamping the ground, at breakfast.

"Where's old Nels?" he demanded of John. "Tell him to hook a horse to the double cutter. We'll drive up there first, you'n and I and Whitey Jack, and have

the buildings located by the time the first sleigh gets there."

But old Nels was nowhere to be found in camp. He had appeared early at the cook-shack, volunteered Dugan, had eaten a bite before the other men had come in, and after that he had vanished from the sight of men. A thought struck John and he hastened to Nels' bunk and looked at the two buck-heads where Nels hung his rifle. The rifle was gone. Wherefore John was not at all surprised when, in the rising daylight, Whitey Jack drove him and Wolf John out toward the King Pines to find the imprint of Nels' rubbers before them in the snow of the road.

"Nels must know where there's a deer yarding and's gone out to get him," said Brackett, wrinkling one side of his old face in a colossal wink. Whitey Jack had taken his own 30-30 in the sleigh beside him, "in case we run into a buck on the road."

Wolf John was raging.

"—— his old Norsky hide! I won't have any of that gun-expert business. I don't hire men to do my fighting. When I get ready to wipe out that gang up there I'll go up to Whisky Falls and kick the whole mess into the river. I don't go hiding behind any hired shooter, like Jim Lowrey. I'll have a word for Nels' ear when he comes back."

At the edge of the swamp Nels' tracks swung off the road and instead of continuing straight toward the spot where the camp was to be located, made a sweeping curve in the direction of Whisky Falls. In curiosity, Whitey Jack got out and carefully examined the tracks.

"The little son-of-a-gun!" he chortled as he climbed back into the sleigh. "He's over an hour ahead of us. Must have gone in the dark. Well, I'll bet there won't be anybody running down from the Falls to bother us

to-day; little old Nels will be setting on the run-way asking tickets of anybody trying to get by. Cripes!"

Far up the marsh a black speck showed as it rose from behind a clump of snow-covered alders; a spit of fire in the semi-daylight, a whining sound sweeping over their heads so closely that they ducked. The vicious crack of a high-power rifle came floating after it.

Then the black speck vanished behind its hiding-place. But only for a second. It rose again! Then suddenly it ducked without firing. Beyond it, from behind a sheltering tussock, came another flash of spitting fire; then a boom, louder, heavier than the first report.

"That's Nels!" cried John as he leaped out and forced the horse back into the shelter of the timber. "That's his old 45-90. God!"

Once more the quiet of dawn was ripped by the spiteful crack of the nearer rifle. But this time it was not turned on the three in the sleigh, but on the tussock from behind which had come the second shot. One, two, three shots; then stillness. No reply from the 45-90. Nothing.

"He got him," gasped Whitey Jack. "Poor old Nels; he got him sure!"

The figure behind the alders seemed to be of the same impression. Cautiously it lifted itself. It stood out black against the snow-covered bushes for an instant, then as a streak of flame came swiftly from a spot to one side of the tussock, it dropped its rifle, ducked, and with one arm swinging wildly, ran with queer, jerky motions for the shelter of near-by trees.

"Curly Joe!" growled Whitey Jack. "See the gait of him! Nels got him in the right arm!"

The three men in the timber saw a figure rise to one knee where the last shot had come from.

"Nels!" cried John, recognising the teamster's cap.

Slowly they saw Nels' rifle come to a steady aim at

the fleeing man. To John the seconds seemed to be minutes of agony while he waited fearfully for the fatal roar of the big gun. They saw the rifle-barrel move as it followed the gunman's twisted flight. And then—what John had hoped for—they saw the rifle slowly lowered, saw Nels stand up, let the hammer down and stand with the rifle in the crook of his arm, while Curly Joe, whose life had been spared because he had no gun, made his escape into the dark, screening timber.

A wild, explosive yell of relief broke from John's pent-up lungs.

"Good boy, Nels; good boy!" he cried. "He wouldn't kill him—he saw he wasn't armed!"

Whitey Jack and Wolf John looked at the young man curiously.

"You act like you were glad that killer got away," said Wolf John curtly.

"I am. It would have been too tough—the other thing."

"He didn't have a show, of course, but——" Whitey Jack nodded grudgingly.

"But the next shot he'd have had the range on us," roared the old man, "and d'you think it would have stopped him to see we weren't shooting back? Get in; drive on. Nels gave 'em a taste of our medicine, anyway," he concluded with a grim smile. "They'll take their time before trading any more gun-plays with the old Norsky. Whip up, Whitey Jack; we've lost ten minutes. Say nothing about this to any of the boys."

It was when they were well across the timber and entering the King Pines that John thought of the fact that he had heard a deadly bullet whistle within a foot of his head and that he should have been afraid.

"Bart did that, didn't he?" he said as the thought came to him suddenly. "Bart sent that fellow there; nobody else knew we'd be along here this morning."

"Bart did it," agreed Wolf John. "And Bart knows enough about Nels' shooting to know that he'll have to rig up something beside a straight out-and-out fight to keep us from logging. We've got to keep our eyes peeled, though, youngster; there's pretty near as much fox in Bart as there is bull."

CHAPTER XXI

THE NEW FOREMAN

WOLF JOHN was right. The procession of sleighs bearing the dismantled bunk-house came clanking over the marsh and into the King Pines, and the work of setting up a new camp began without any sign of interference from the gangs at Whisky Falls. The sleighs were unloaded swiftly by the men who had accompanied them, and the work of clearing away the snow and laying the floor timbers for the new bunk-house had begun before the teams had been swung around and sent back to Main Camp for the cook-shack, which the crew that had been left at the old camp even then were busy dismantling.

"It ain't logging," protested Whitey Jack over and over again. "No, sir; moving a camp in the middle of Winter like this ain't logging, but as long as she's started nobody's got a right to play high-banker."

Though the majority of the men had not closed their eyes the night before, there were but a few of them who grumbled and hung back at the idea of working all day as well. French Jimmy, the man who had attempted to lead a raid on the stables Christmas Eve, and whom John had knocked down, was the leader of the discontented ones. He did his best to hold back the job; grumbled that they were being ill used, that they might as well "soldier" now that Bart was gone, because they could run the camp about as they saw fit now, and offered to go up and tell Wolf John that they didn't in-

tend to do double time, if the men would agree to back him up. Two or three men agreed with him, and French Jimmy approached Norby, whose great shoulders at that moment were shoving a base-log into position. Norby had picked up carpentering some time in his wanderings and was directing the erection of the buildings.

"Don' mak' slave of yourself," said French Jimmy.

"Bart, he's no' here no more. We mak' job in thees camp easy cinch, eh? We ain' go'n keel ourself hustling for Wolf John and dat fool neveu, eh? Come on; we tell 'em go to ——"

Norby straightened up slowly, smiling innocently.

"You mean we shall put the job on the bum, eh?"

"Tha's eet, tha's eet! We go'n'—*Sacre!* What do you mean?"

Norby's long right arm licked out and a hand like a bear's paw jerked him off his feet. Gently but firmly Norby held him by the scruff of the neck and bumped his forehead against the base-log three times.

"Take hold there, Frenchy," he commanded. "You think you will put the camp on the bum, eh? Well, just for that I will make it my business to see that you work just a little bit harder than any other man on the job. Take hold."

French Jimmy writhed and swore viciously in two tongues.

"You ain' mah boss; lemme go!"

"I am your boss," said Norby. "I am man enough to boss you. Take hold."

John soon noticed that Norby not only was directing the placing of the timbers of the bunk-house but was acting as boss of the job, driving French Jimmy and his companions to their work as fiercely as Bart ever drove.

"Norby," he said, calling him to one side, "how would you like to be straw-boss on this building job?"

Norby smiled and shook his head.

"I am a good man when I am under somebody else," he said, "but I have been working under other men too long to be worth my salt when I am head man. You boss me, and I boss them, and we will do well; but if you make me boss of myself and them I will be no good."

Wolf John began the morning with a rush that reminded the older men of the time when he was the hardest-working, hardest-driving walking-boss on the Brulé River. He rushed the crew around until the sites for the various buildings had been selected, the snow cleared away and the ground levelled. He took Whitey Jack, John and two ax-men with him into the woods, laid out the line of the main road—an easy task, for the great trees stood so far apart that few needed to be felled for a straight road, and the ground was level—and had a crew set to work at road-making.

"No swamping, easy skidding, easy logging," he said, as he looked around at the clean woods with little or no underbrush. "We'll log more logs per man than we ever did before. John, it's a great game, logging; it's man's work."

After an hour or so his rushing leadership began to falter. He was content to sit in his cutter, watching John as he led the crews at their various tasks, occasionally barking out a word of advice or command.

"The old man's fading," said Whitey Jack sorrowfully. "This camp is going to be all shot to pieces for a boss, I'm afraid, unless the young un makes good. They certainly are going to be crippled without Bull Bart. The old man don't belong in the bush any more. It's up to the young fellow."

"Huh! If so, then all the more reason for us who've drawed his pay so long to log a little harder," said Norby, and Whitey Jack agreed.

The attitude of the men toward John, with the exception of French Jimmy and a few others of his ilk, had not changed perceptibly since Wolf John's announcement of his nephew's true name and position. Men in the woods do not fawn to authority. Each man knows that he is as good as the next fellow until the latter proves the contrary with the strength of his bare hands, and there is no room in the camps for any man who can not do his full day's work.

Having done it, the logger asks no favours, yields no servility to any boss or owner. The men acknowledged the receipt of John's proper name and condition by calling him "Peabody," "John," or "Jack," where formerly it had been "Mud." He was one of them, even if he was a boss. If he had not been one of them they would soon have made him weary of the woods.

"Of course I knew he wasn't no common guy hunting for a job," said Brackett, the big top-loader. "You could tell by his talk he wasn't no common stiff."

"I could tell by the way he stuck with me that first day, when I saw he was half dead after a couple hours," said Norby. "He wasn't built for a sawyer, but he stuck."

"I knew it, too," protested Burns, scratching his bandaged head. "Hang it if I could just tell why, but I knew it by the way we all piled in after him when he tackled that gang robbing the stables."

French Jimmy's sullen remembrance of the blow John had given him in the stables had blossomed into open hatred after hearing who and what John was. He was shrewd enough to keep his feelings hidden from John, but to those few who looked on him as a leader he confided his determination to get even for that blow. For the present, as he was under Norby's eye and within reach of Norby's right arm, French Jimmy was forced

to work at the swift pace that the crews were setting in the erection of the new camp.

John threw himself into the task of rushing the work with all the energy in him. He knew that the majority of the men were his friends, and this knowledge gave him confidence. He did not drive; he knew that if he led the best men of the camp would follow him, just as they had followed into the stables on Christmas Eve.

When there was a fresh piece of work to be started, a heavy timber to be moved, a joist to be swung in place, he was the first to lay hold. He was doing more actual physical work than he had done even while sawing with Norby, but he did not know it. The exhilaration of the game spurred him and gave him added strength. His faculty for keeping those with whom he worked in good humour stood him in good stead. The men worked as steadily when he was absent as when he was with them.

From his seat in the sleigh Wolf John watched closely. When the second procession of sleighs came at noon, bearing at one time the cook-shack and the dinner which Fatty had cooked back at Main Camp before the shack had been torn down, he nodded approvingly.

"Cook-shack and bunk-house up by to-night," he said. "Stables, blacksmith, wood-butcher and wannigan up by Monday night. We'll be ready to start making saw-logs Tuesday morning."

"I've been thinking of that," replied John. "It seems to me that the thing to do is to get the work up here started before Bart and that gang can do anything to keep it from starting. The longer we delay the more time and chance they'll have to spring something to stop us. For one thing, they're naturally figuring that the regular Saturday night and Sunday spree of the boys will give them a chance to put a crimp in us.

"Bart is a fox, as you say, and so is Wah Song, if I'm any judge, and if they aren't planning at this moment

to do their best to-night and to-morrow to keep as many men as possible from coming back to camp, or coming back fit to work, I miss my guess. Why wouldn't it be a good thing to work right through to-morrow, Sunday, and gain a day? Then we'd be ready to start logging Monday morning, which Bart and his gang won't expect."

Wolf John studied his nephew with frank curiosity.

"Youngster, are you letting your new partnership go to your head?"

"I hope not. Why?"

"Did you ever hear of a crew of lumber-jacks working through a Sunday with whisky only four or five miles away? If you think you can keep enough of the boys at work to-morrow to move the rest of the buildings up here, go ahead and see how bad you fall down."

"All right," said John, "I'll try."

The noon meal, freshly heated over a hastily rigged-up range, had been placed on the long tables set up on the cleared spot where the cook-shack was to stand. With a last look to see that the food was ready, Dugan shouted his inviting, "Take 'er!" and the men rushed from their work to the tables. John had given orders to Fatty that the meal was to be a particularly good one, in spite of the kitchen's disruption, and he waited until the men had gorged themselves into a state of comfort before he spoke.

"Boys," he said bluntly, rising in his place, "I want you to work to-morrow. How about you?"

There was no answer. They knew he had more to say and waited to hear it.

"You see how we're fixed here," he went on. "Half of the camp up here, half of it back at the old place. If we work to-morrow we'll be all settled here by to-morrow night. You all did the fair thing by the Company by working last night. The Company won't forget that, as you'll see when you get your checks. I'm not

asking anybody to work to-morrow who doesn't want to. You've got a right to lay off if you want to, and there won't be any hard feelings toward you if you do. But if you work there'll be an extra day's pay on your checks, at double time. Now how about it? Do enough of you want to work so we can make up a crew big enough to do some good? Those who want to work hold up their hands."

Half of the men, the oldest and best men in the crew, held up their hands at once. One by one others joined them, at the persuasion of the old men, until only a few, including French Jimmy and his friends, failed to give the sign that they were willing to forego one Sunday's rest.

"All right; that's what I expected," said John. "I knew you boys would stand by the Company. All right, then; to-morrow we finish the job of moving camp. In the meantime, let's get at the cook-shack as quick as we can so Fatty'll have some place to get our supper. And if it isn't a good one we'll eat him."

The men laughed—for there is always war between lumber-jacks and cooks—and returned good-naturedly to their work as soon as the meal was done. They displayed even more enthusiasm over a speedy erection of the cook-shack than they had displayed over the bunk-house, valuing their meals much higher than their beds.

Nels came stalking into camp and took his place at one of the tables soon after the other men had left. He carried Curly Joe's rifle as well as his own, and without a word he fell to eating. Wolf John studied him carefully.

"Where you been all morning?" he demanded.

"I been looking for signs—up Whisky Falls way," replied Nels quietly.

"See any?"

"Only one set of tracks, coming and going back." Nels

gulped a mouthful of hot coffee. "They was Curly Joe's," he added. "I followed 'em to within sight of the Falls. I kind of waited around up there; I thought maybe some one'd be coming this way. If I'd 'a' got out this morning a little earlier I'd 'a' met Curly Joe on his way here, but he was hid down there in the alders before daylight. I'd just hit his track and was trailing him when he cut loose at you. He may be a good shot, that Curly Joe, but he's a —— fool to start shooting then. It was 'way too dark to see the sights."

Wolf John opened his mouth to launch forth a denunciation of Nels for quitting his duties as teamster without leaving word. His eyes caught sight of Curly Joe's captured rifle, however, and he desisted. He looked from Nels to the hard-working crew which had agreed to his nephew's request that they work on Sunday, with whisky only a few miles away.

"Ho hum!" he sighed. "I guess the old man's place ain't in the bush any longer. All I'm fit for now is to sit behind a desk and sign checks. But I'm going to stay here until the first tree goes down, even if it puts me in bed to do it."

He did not even put in a word when French Jimmy and two other men demanded and received their time that evening. John gave them their checks with an alacrity that took the wind out of French Jimmy's sails. He started to deal out insult and defiance, but caught Norby's eye on him and desisted. Norby grinned as Jimmy slung his war-bag over his shoulder and slunk off into the woods toward Whisky Falls.

CHAPTER XXII

FRENCH JIMMY STEALS A HORSE

JOHN went back to the old camp and slept in the stables that Saturday night. Since Curly Joe had fired that single shot of the morning he realised that Bart and his gang had started the war to cripple and hinder the start of logging in the King Pines. The feat of moving the camp depended entirely upon horses to haul it from its new site to the old, a fact with which Bart was fully familiar. A night raid of the gang from the Falls on the stables, the destruction of horses, and Bart would have dealt a blow which would seriously impair the chances for success in the new camp.

John unrolled his blankets in the hay-shed and went to sleep where any one entering the stable doors would have to pass within a few yards of his head. He resolved to sleep as little as possible. Having made this resolve, the fatigue incident to being without sleep the night before and of doing two men's work during the day, claimed its own and he went soundly to sleep.

He was awakened by the glare of a light shining in his eyes. Sleepily he rolled over, wondering if he had slept so long that the sun could be shining. No, it couldn't be the sun; the sun didn't jump and flicker like this light. Neither did it crackle, nor bring with it a smell of smoke to the nostrils. Thoroughly awake, John sprang up and located the light. It was a tongue of flame swiftly eating its way through a crack in one corner of the light board hay-shed, and as John watched it a tiny

pencil of flame shot out and took hold of the loose inflammable hay.

There was no time to summon men to help. A delay of a few seconds, and the hay would be burning too fiercely to be stopped. John leaped for the corner, stamped out the tiny beginning of the fire and with his hands dragged away the hay from the burning corner. This done he ran out to where the fire had started. To seize a shovel and toss snow on the shed until the flames were dead required only a few seconds.

Then John looked around. The camp slept; there was not a sign or sound that any one had stirred recently. Lighting a match, he went down on his knees in the snow and searched for the origin of the fire.

Beneath the snow with which he had stopped the flames he found a charred pitch-pine knot, properly slivered for breaking into a blaze at the touch of a match. Under the light of the full moon the snow lay undisturbed around the shed. The absence of foot-prints puzzled John until in the road which passed within a few yards of the shed he found fresh hoof-marks and the fresh tracks of a cutter. It would have been an easy thing to sit in the cutter, light the prepared pitch-pine and toss it against the wall of the shed.

John followed the cutter tracks until they turned toward Whisky Falls. Returning to camp he searched for tracks to indicate where the cutter had come into camp. To his amazement he retraced the tracks to a spot beyond the stables where the sleighs were wont to stand. He saw that an old cutter was missing and hurried to the stables.

The stable door stood open. Inside in a stall lay old Lavin, the stableman, a cut on the top of his head, a strap in his mouth for a gag, and his legs and arms tied securely in a pair of lines. John freed him and set him on his feet.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

It was some time before the old man could speak.

"All I know is that somebody came to the door and called my name softly," said he. "I opened the door and something took me on the head, and that was all I knew until I came to in the stall there."

Lighting a lantern, John bade him see if the horses were all present.

"The dirty dawgs!" cried the old man, as he came to the end of the stalls. "They've stolen little Fanny. By cripes! This has been somebody who knew these stables, Mr. Peabody. They knew Fanny was blind, and it's only a blind horse that will go out in the night in strange hands without whinnying or making any fuss."

John thought the situation over and decided not to say anything about the attempt to fire the hay-shed.

"All right, Lavin," he said. "Come on out and we'll wash that cut of yours and put a little bandage on it. I suppose some of the boys got crazy to go to the Falls and borrowed the horse. I don't want you to say anything about it to anybody. Understand? This is between you and me. We'll handle 'em when they come back with the horse, if it's some of the boys."

John did not sleep any more that night. He lay in the hay-shed and stared sleeplessly into the dark. There was no danger of another fire that night, but the possibilities suggested by this new attack refused to allow him to slumber. If the intent had been merely to fire the stables why had the incendiaries gone to the risk of stealing a company horse? If Lavin was right, and the horse-thieves were familiar with Fanny's blindness and docility, they must have belonged to the camp recently.

Big Charley, Bart, French Jimmy and his two followers were the only men from Main Camp who could be at Whisky Falls unless some of the crew had deserted that night. Big Charley's cowardice would never

permit him to attempt such a dangerous enterprise; if Bart had made the attempt personally he would have made it a success and made sure that the hay and stables would burn. That left French Jimmy and his crew. John lay miserably on the hay and wondered if there were any more French Jimmies left among his men.

His first act in the morning was to ascertain that all the men were present and fit for work. With the exception of the three men who had quit Saturday night the crew turned out bright and early, every man ready for work after a full night's sleep.

"It's French Jimmy," decided John.

He kept the night's events to himself, and repeated his injunctions to Lavin to say nothing about the assault upon him or the theft of the horse and cutter. Fanny, being a little driver, was not used in the work of moving camp, consequently her absence was not noticed; and John was resolved that the camp should be moved before he even paused to think of other things, such as, for instance, the recovery of a stolen horse.

The weather favoured him. The warm spell held, and Sunday dawned mild and clear, the sort of a day when men in the woods doff their mackinaws and heavy mittens and snow-ball one another from sheer excess of high spirits.

"Let's hustle it at the jump, boys," said John, leading the way in the hardest work. "Then we'll be sure of getting moved up there. After that we can take it easy."

The manner in which the men cheerfully tackled the extra day's work assured him that he had no more to fear from traitors like French Jimmy. A few of the men, the ones who had at first expressed themselves against working on Sunday, took hold carelessly at first.

"Oh, well, it's better than the regular Sunday morning hang-over," they said, and presently they were keep-

ing pace with Norby, Whitey Jack and the other men who were working with an eagerness second only to that of John.

By nightfall what remained of Main Camp had been removed to its new site, the walls of the stables were up, the sheds of the blacksmith, the wood-butcher had been begun, and as it then stood the camp was ready for half of the crew to start logging on Monday morning.

"It ain't logging," repeated Whitey Jack for the fiftieth time, "but here we are just the same."

Wolf John took no part in the day's rush. He watched the capable fashion in which the work went on with a tinge of sadness in his old, lined face. He sensed the coming of the new generation, and though he warmed with pride at the thought that the new leader was one of his own kin he did not fail to sense a pang as he realised that his reign was done.

"Is it going all right, Uncle John?" asked John after supper.

"Huh! Little need you've got to ask me that," growled the old man. "I can not understand where you got the knack of handling men."

"It's the men themselves," said John. "They're a bunch of bricks. I don't do anything; they give the best that's in 'em, their experience and everything else."

"Exactly. And that's what I said: I don't see where you learned the trick of making men do that without driving. Hear that now. Ah! That's one of the secrets!"

In the bunk-house the men were holding a mock-christening on the new building. Dugan, with a horse-blanket wrapped around him for a dress, and leaning mincingly on Norby's arm, broke a catsup bottle on the door-post, saying in a high falsetto as he did so:

"I christen thee the good ship Bed Bug."

Inside the men were laughing and singing, the guitar

was plunking and above the medley rose loudly the calls that had attracted Wolf John's attention.

"Oh ho, Boss John! Oh, Mr. Peabody alias Mud! Yo ho, Jack; give us a little song for the christening. Come on, Boss John."

Laughing heartily John joined the fun-making. The still dread which had been in his heart since his discovery of the attempt to fire the stables vanished. The friendship of the men assured him. What could Bart and Wah Song and their gang do to stop him when he had at his back a crew of men such as these? He ceased to be the watchful, worrying foreman and for the time being became "one of the boys."

"Give us 'Home, Sweet Home,'" suggested some one. "That's appropriate to christ'nings. I know; I went to one once and we all sang that."

"'Home, Sweet Home,'" chorused a dozen voices. "Even if Dugan did christen her 'Bed Bug.'"

For an hour the fun-making and singing continued at its height. Then John slipped out. The sentimental songs—the rougher men are the more sentimental are the songs that find their favour—had evoked thoughts of Belle, and he wished to be alone with his memories, his feelings and his hopes. The road leading back to Main Camp's site found favour with him, possibly because it ran also to Peabody Point, and under the light of the full moon he wandered away from the noise of the camp into the silent woods.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WAY OF WAH SONG

OUT in the pines he stopped and leaned against the trunk of a tree. It was in the few minutes of perfect quiet following the coming of darkness, and in the woods not a bough moved. So still was it that John heard the faint tinkle of sleighbells down the road fully a mile away. He listened carefully and heard that the bells were coming toward him at a good pace.

Caution prompted him to step into the dark shadow of a tree and watch the road. Soon the sleigh appeared, and in the moonlight John recognised the cutter and horse driven by a pale little clerk from the office at Peabody Point.

"Hello," called John, stepping into the road. "What's the hurry?"

The clerk pulled up nervously.

"Oh, hello, Mud—Mr. Peabody, I mean," he gasped in relief. "Well, how is he?"

"How is who?"

A shade of surprise flickered on the clerk's pale face.

"The old man—Wolf John. Is he pretty bad?"

It was John's turn to betray surprise.

"Let's get this straight," he said. "Is anything supposed to be the matter with my Uncle John?"

Now the clerk was frankly amazed.

"Anything the matter with him?" he said slowly. "Well, I should say so. He had an attack of heart failure this morning, didn't he?"

John stood staring at the little clerk as if he did not understand.

"Who told you that?" he said suddenly.

"Why, the man you sent down after Miss Belle, of course."

A sudden, killing chill seemed suddenly to reach in and freeze John's heart in his breast. A sickening sensation smote him in the pit of the stomach, and his knees felt weak and powerless. He stood like a man turned to stone.

"Good God!" he cried. "What are you talking about, man? Miss Peabody, Belle—a man I sent after her?"

The clerk looked dumfounded.

"Isn't she here?" he asked lamely. "Where's Wolf John?"

Then the ice in John's veins turned to fire. He seized the little man by the breast of his mackinaw and forcibly dragged him from the sleigh.

"No, Miss Belle isn't here," he snarled, as if the clerk were responsible for her absence. "Wolf John is in camp, in the cook-shack. There isn't anything the matter with him; he didn't have any attack of heart failure; I didn't send any man down after Miss Belle. Speak, man; speak out! What are you telling me?"

The little man writhed painfully in his fierce grasp.

"Don't—don't shake me to pieces, Mr. Peabody," he chattered. "I ain't to blame. I didn't have anything to do with it. One of the men came driving a sweating horse down to the Point about 3:30, and said Wolf John had had a stroke up here and that you'd said for Miss Belle to jump right in and come up as fast as the horse could go. That's all I know about it. I didn't have anything to do in the office, so I started about half an hour later to see if there was anything I could do."

"And Belle—she went with the man?"

"Sure. Why shouldn't she? It was French Jimmy.

She knew him; he had one of the company's drivers—that blind Fanny—and he said he came from you. Didn't she—didn't she get here at all, Mr. Peabody?"

John leaned against the horse and groaned.

"Good God, no! She didn't get here. French Jimmy has gone over to the gang at the Falls, and he stole that horse."

The clerk began to tremble.

"Mr. Peabody—they haven't—they haven't——" His mouth remained open, but the dread words refused to come.

Overhead the early night wind began to stir the pines into their soothing murmur. John stood still and silent. The camp, the pines, his uncle, the fight against Lowrey's gang, the fight to make good, the fight for success—life itself—all had faded in a moment to total insignificance. What did they matter now? What did they mean to him?

In a moment he understood that these things to him now were as naught; that the question of Belle's danger outweighed them so completely that life for him just then had but one aim. To get to Belle's side; to find her, to get her out of danger. That was what he had to do now; that was all he had to think of. He saw it clearly. The understanding gave him a sudden new strength and determination.

"Look here, son," he said suddenly to the clerk, "you're not to say a word about this to anybody else. Understand? You're to keep it quiet. Can you stand to turn right around and drive back to the Point without your supper? You're man enough for that, aren't you?"

The clerk swelled with pride and stammered—

"Sure thing."

"Fine! I knew you could. That's all; just get back to the Point without letting a soul know that Belle's missing. If Wolf John knew it now he'd—well, he

mustn't know unless we've got to tell him. Got that straight? All right. Now go!"

Alone, John turned his face up toward the murmuring pines, and his clenched fists raised themselves in a movement half curse, half prayer. Against the rising moonlight the pine boughs murmured serenely; his head bowed and he stood irresolute. The still spell of early evening was upon the forest, and the world seemed empty.

The camp and the men at his back John had forgotten. His reasoning powers seemed frozen. Belle was some place in the woods—in danger! Nothing else in the world existed for him; nothing moved him but the desire—nay, the need to go forth and seek her.

It was not reason that sent him lunging blindly into the black woods alone, when there were a hundred men at his back ready to comb the woods with him until she was found. It was not reason that set his hurrying feet unerringly through the timber to the river trail to Whisky Falls. What could one man do against the gang up there, one man with his bare hands? It was not reason, it was instinct that drove him. It was the new, great need that had sprung up in his heart, and the need was as deep and inevitable as the song of the pines when the eternal winds stir them.

He went at a pace that was little short of a run. He had no plan. He knew that French Jimmy had been acting for the gang at the Falls; that Belle had been deceived into entering the cutter and had been driven away somewhere by the gang. That even such a gang, led by Bart and Wah Song, would dare to do her harm he did not for a moment believe; for at the word that Belle, the idol of the Point, had been harmed, Bart and his minions knew that two hundred men would be out combing the timbers to wipe them off the earth, no matter what the cost.

No, they wouldn't dare to hurt her; they would keep

her as hostage, hidden some place near by. Where this hiding-place might be John could not imagine. In fact, he did not stop long to ponder over it.

From Whisky Falls the arm had reached forth that had snatched Belle away. At Whisky Falls were the men who had planned and performed the kidnapping; and there was where the men who knew of Belle's whereabouts were to be found. Very well, he would go to Whisky Falls and choke the knowledge out of them. No thought of what a foolhardy thing it was to attempt; no realisation that at Whisky Falls his life would be worth only the price of one cartridge.

His instinct told him to go on. It lifted him above himself, and it deprived him of caution or reason. He was within sight of the very lights of the place, was breaking into a run that would carry him in through the door of Wah Song's place, where Bart probably was to be found, when a shivering woman stepped into the road before him and he stopped.

"I thought you'd be coming—some of you—when you found out," she said, and John recognised the voice of the woman whom he had picked up in the snow on Christmas Eve. "I been waiting for you till I'm near froze. I'd 'a' gone down to your camp if you hadn't come; I would, so help me God, though they'd killed me for it."

"Belle—Miss Peabody—do you know where she is?" interrupted John.

"Yes, yes. But don't holler, don't talk so loud." The woman drew him back in the shadow of the ledge where she had been waiting. "I know; I know where she is. But Bart didn't do it. Believe that, Mister; I swear it by my lost soul. Bart didn't do it; he wouldn't 'a' done it. It was Wah Song. You gotta believe that. You mustn't hold Bart responsible."

"Where is she?" demanded John impatiently.

"Will you believe what I say?" insisted the woman.

"Will you remember it wasn't Bart? If you don't, I swear I won't tell you where she is."

"You swear it wasn't Bart?"

She looked up at him appealingly.

"It wasn't—I swear it!"

"All right. I believe you. Now where is she?"

"In a little shanty on the big bayou just around the bend of the river, about a mile down there," she said, pointing. "I heard Wah Song telling French Jimmy where to take her. The shanty's built under a ledge of rocks; you can't see it until you're almost on it. Go down the river till you come to the mouth of the bayou, then follow the left bank till you come to the ledge."

She caught hold of his arm as he started away without a word.

"You'll remember that it wasn't Bart?" she said swiftly.

"Yes, yes." Then he suddenly realised the ingratitude he was displaying toward the woman, and paused.

"You—you know you've done something awful fine," he said. "If there's anything I can do to square it with you ever——"

"You did it," she whispered, as she prepared to slink back to the Falls. "You did it, Christmas Eve, when you treated me just like any other woman—after you knew."

John leaped down the bank on to the smooth snow covering of the river ice and ran as swiftly as he could for the bend which the woman had indicated. The moon was up above the timber-line, and on the white ribbon of snow down which he raced he saw another set of tracks where some one had gone before him. He paused a moment to examine them. The tracks were new, had been made within an hour, and were made by a man running at top speed in the same direction as himself.

John ran faster. As he reached the big bend he saw

that the tracks curved toward the farther bank. Breathless, he followed them and they led him straight to the mouth of the bayou of which the woman had spoken. Here there were other tracks. John saw that two men at least had gone up the bayou, one certainly had come back, and his heart leaped as he saw beside the larger footprints the small marks of Belle's moccasins. The woman from Whisky Falls had told the truth; she was up there some place on the bayou: there were no small tracks coming back.

The bayou, a long narrow bay, ran upstream behind the ridge that marked the river bank, almost parallel with the course of the stream. It was as dark as the Pit. Tall pines lined it on one side; on the other a dense swamp of tamaracks shut out the light from the rising moon. The snow on the ice alone was visible and John ran on, hugging the left bank.

The smooth expanse of snow seemed to end abruptly before him. There was no ledge of rocks, no shanty! Only pine and tamarack, desolate and silent. The hope and confidence in his heart faltered and gave place to chilling fear. He had been tricked; he had been sent on a wild-goose chase; he——

"Bang!" went a faint shot almost, it seemed, at his shoulder.

John swung around. The sound of the shot had barely reached him, and yet it sounded close by, as if it were muffled. John sprang in the direction whence it came. Then he saw the narrow opening in the tamaracks where the bayou slipped through, and sprang through it and found himself in the main part of the bay, a large, lake-like surface where the rays of the moon reached in and made all things light. At his left was the ledge of rocks, and in a crevice, hidden, all save its narrow front wall, was a tiny cabin, and to one side of the cabin's board door was the dark form of a man.

"You —— little fool, you!" roared the man, and it was Bart's voice. "Don't shoot at me. I want to let you out. I didn't do this; it was that fool, Wah Song. He just told me. I've come here to let you get out and go home."

"Bang!" came a second muffled shot, and a second splinter flew off the board door. John's heart leaped exultantly. He understood the scene now. Belle was in there, but she had something to shoot with and was safe.

"Keep away, Bart." From the inside of the cabin Belle's voice came faintly but with an indomitable ring in it. "Keep away from the door. Try to open it and—I won't miss you."

John leaped forward madly.

"Belle, Belle!" he cried, without realising what he said. "It's all right, it's all right. I've found you—I've found you!"

A snarl and a curse as Bart swung around. Then to John it seemed that the ice had risen and smitten him in the back of the head, and he was conscious that he was on his back hugging something hard and hairy with a grip as if clinging to life itself.

A second or two and his senses cleared sufficiently to realise that it was Bart's head that he held in chancery. So swiftly had the foreman flung himself forward that John had neither time to see nor guard. Instinctively he had clamped his big arms upon the first thing that offered; so now the two of them rolled and thrashed in the snow on the ice, Bart's fists flailing murderously for John's head, his body writhing and leaping like a bobcat's to free itself from the grip that had made Big Charley cry, "Enough!"

"It's all right, Belle!" panted John. "It's all right."

"Is it?" hissed Bart.

A wrench and his body bent almost double, one knee

found a resting-spot on John's body, and he tore himself free.

"Is it?" he cried triumphantly as his other knee found John's stomach, his left hand reached for a throat-hold and his right fist aimed a blow at the face below him.

John writhed to one side, partly avoided the blow, flung his arms up, caught a hold around Bart's hips, and brought him down into the snow again. Within the cabin John heard Belle pounding on the door.

"Unbar the door!" she begged. "Oh, unbar the door. It's barred on the outside. Let me get out; I—I want to help you."

John spat out a mouthful of blood.

"It's all right," he managed to gasp. "Don't worry."

He knew he was beaten. He realised it the moment when Bart had broken the head hold. The body which he gripped was like a body of supple steel, no yielding, no soft places to clamp on a grip, but steel-like muscles everywhere, flowing beneath his arms irresistibly.

Let Bart but get free long enough to land one blow from his terrible fists and the fight would be over. And get free he would soon; John knew he could not hold him. He felt himself weakening, while the terrible struggle seemed not even to have made Bart breathe more rapidly. The ex-foreman's curses rang steadily in his ear. His fists tried incessantly to reach his head.

Then suddenly both curses and blows stopped. Through the roaring blood that was pounding in his temples John heard as if far away six faint pops in rapid succession. Also a sound of something ripping. His dimming senses recognised the sounds: that was the way that first shot sounded in the cabin.

"Oh, John, John!" Belle's voice far away, but somehow much clearer than before. "I can get out. Wait—wait till I shoot this hole a little larger and I can reach the bar outside. I'm coming!"

"—— you!" Bart cursed and tore to free himself, only to free himself. He ceased to strike. "You got to have help from a woman, you pup!"

One, two, three, four more shots and the noise of ripping boards. A glad cry from within the cabin; the sound of a board falling on the hard ground. Bart tore himself free and disappeared with great bounds into the darkness of the timber as Belle thrust open the cabin door and sprang out into the moonlight, revolver in hand.

John staggered to his feet.

"It's all right, Belle—Miss Peabody. You're—not hurt?"

"I? Of course not. Where's Bart—where did he go? Oh! You're hurt, John!"

"Thank God you're all right!" he said weakly. "Then everything is—all right."

Down in the snow dropped the revolver from her hand as she saw his cut and bleeding face.

"Oh, oh!" She swayed, her hands clasping her bosom, the strength of the moment before vanishing in a flutter of feminine tenderness. She ran to him, scooping handfuls of snow and pressing it to his wounds.

"Hold it there," she said, as she reached for fresh snow. "It's stopping, isn't it? You're not badly hurt, are you?"

"Why—why I'm all right," protested John. "It's—it's you; are you—all right?"

"Yes, yes. But your face—John. Here's more snow. Are you hurt any place else? Oh, are you? Please tell me."

She ministered to him, entirely forgetful of herself, brave and shuddering by turns, sometimes half-laughing, again near to sobs. The cold snow soon checked the flow of blood. With more snow she washed from his face the red traces of the fight in spite of his attempts to stop her. In the moon's rising light she tore her handker-

chief and his into strips and bound up his forehead and jaw where he was hurt. Then, when he was properly bandaged, for the first time did she seem to think of herself and her recent captivity.

"How in the world did you find me?" she gasped. "How did you know of this place?"

John told her in a few words how the clerk had brought the news, how he had met the woman from Whisky Falls and had been directed to the shanty. Then Belle related how she had been tricked into coming to the shanty on the bayou.

"I didn't have a shade of doubt that everything was all right when French Jimmy came driving up to the house and told me you'd sent for me to come," she said. "How could I? I'd been fearing that I'd hear some such news ever since you told me about Uncle John. I didn't suspect a thing, and I slipped the revolver and cartridge belt under my sweater simply because I never go into the woods without them.

"French Jimmy said Uncle John was at the new camp, but just the other side of where Main Camp used to be a man met us in the road and said we were to come here; that you had started to drive down the river with Uncle John and that he'd got so bad that you had to stop and place him in this shanty.

"Then French Jimmy swung up the river and we came here. It was pitch dark when we got here. The door of the shanty was open, and there were two or three men standing outside. I couldn't see who they were, but one of them said:

"'He's inside there; hurry up if you want to see him alive.' Well, I ran in, frantic, and then they slammed the door shut and dropped the bar and went away. If I'd known where the bar was I would have shot a hole in the door right away, but I didn't know until Bart came down just now and started to raise the bar. He

got here just a minute before you did—and then you came and everything was all right," she concluded.

"Yes, thanks to your getting out," said John, abashed.

"And Uncle John?" she cried.

"Is just as well as when you saw him last. He's safe and sound over at the camp. He doesn't know a thing about this."

"Then I'm glad; then I haven't any hard feelings against the gang at all," she said happily. "They wouldn't have dared to hurt me, anyhow, you know. I had my revolver; they couldn't have hurt me. But what was their idea? Was it Bart's way of taking revenge on Uncle John?"

John told her what the woman from the Falls had told him.

"I really believe it wasn't Bart at all," he said. "You heard him say that as soon as he heard of it he raced down here to set you free. I believe it was Wah Song. Doesn't look like a white man's trick—not up here in the woods. But I suppose Wah Song had some Chinese idea of holding you as hostage. Anyhow, he knew the camp would be deserted while we hunted for you. Perhaps he had some idea of putting the camp out of business while we were out looking for you. I don't know; I don't care now. The thing to do now is to get you safely away from here before Bart and his gang might come back."

Belle quickly picked up the revolver, carefully wiped the snow off it and slipped in four fresh cartridges from the belt beneath her sweater.

"There's no danger for me," she said quietly, placing the weapon in its holster. "But you must hurry and get to where you can dress your hurts carefully. You mustn't be out in the cold any longer than you can help. I'll go with you to camp."

They were hurrying down the dark bayou toward the river. John winced at each reference to his hurts, he

remembered how Bart had dealt them to him, and that Belle knew that Bart was the better man.

"Uncle John is at camp," he said, halting as they emerged from the narrow bayou on to the white, moonlit space of the river. "He doesn't know a thing about this affair. I kept it from him. If you go to camp now at this time of night, how are we going to explain it? It wouldn't be good for him to know about this."

They stood looking at each other, with the eternal silence of the forest about them, the light of the moon upon their eyes.

"We'd better go over toward camp. Then you can wait for me near by while I run in to the stables and get a rig and drive you down to the Point."

"No need at all for that," she said quickly. "I can take the river straight down for about two miles. That brings me to the tote-road about a mile below where Main Camp used to be. From there it isn't over five miles home—only seven miles in all."

"You don't mean you intend to walk it—after what you've gone through?"

"Walk it?" She rose to her tiptoes in the buoyant manner which he had come to know so well. "Why, I feel as if I could run all the way. Really, I won't have you trouble about a rig. You would have to drive me in, and they'd notice your absence and ask questions. No; I'll walk it. I'll be home in two hours."

"If you do," said John, "I'll walk with you."

She looked up seriously.

"No. You're needed at the camp; you know you hadn't ought to be away a minute longer than necessary. As for my going alone——"

She paused, and with her head on one side she listened to the murmur of the pines on the river bank.

"Hear that? Do you think I'm afraid while I hear the pines singing? They make me feel safe, make me

feel at home, you know. They're my friends. And I'm not afraid of Bart. Are you?"

"Come on," he said sharply, and led the way down the river.

She laughed a little as she walked easily at his side.

"You remind me of Uncle John when you talk that way," she said. "Short and commanding; nothing for little me left but to obey humbly."

He walked on without replying. After a while she took hold of the sleeve of his mackinaw lightly. "Cousin John, I've been wondering: where were you going when you met—that woman?"

He replied gruffly that he was going up to the Falls.

"And what were you going to do there?"

"Make them tell me where you were," he said.

"Alone?"

He hesitated.

"I didn't stop to think of that; it was a foolish thing. It was luck that helped me. Nothing but fool's luck."

She did not speak again until they were in the tote-road leading down to the Point. The crunch of their steps on the snow was the only sound that disturbed the silence as they walked along. When they stopped in the road she held out her hand.

"I like your kind of fool's luck, Cousin John," she said, and then she was gone, and John was left staring down the road after her.

CHAPTER XXIV

"GOOD LUCK!"

RO-OLL out! Daylight in the swamp, lumber-jacks. Ro-o-o-oll out!"

It was Monday morning, and Dugan, proud of the fact that it was his lot to announce the coming of the day for starting work in the King Pines, put such extra energy into his waking-call that the soundest sleeper in the bunk-house sat up with a start.

As the men tumbled sleepily out into the open air they shivered and yelled when the cold nipped them. The warm spell had gone. Over night the wind had blown steadily from the north, bringing down the regular January cold spell which had been expected, "three-shirt weather," as the lumber-jacks called it.

"Perfect logging weather," snapped Wolf John as he arose. "Start your sprinkling-cart going on what road's ready. Put in a crew to finish the stretch down to the river. Keep the carts going all night to-night, and we'll have ice-roads by to-morrow morning."

John watched the crew of men come piling out of the cook-shack after breakfast, buttoning mackinaws, slipping on mittens, picking up saws, axes and wedges, and he knew that his test was before him. All that had gone before was incidental. Now the long grind began. Could he handle this big crew of rough men through the long siege of work that was beginning? Would he assay gold in the severe test of being boss alone in the woods at the head of four-score capable men? Or would he prove to be "Mud," after all?

He knew that if the latter were the case these men of the woods would know it before a week had passed. After that there would be nothing for him to do but to pack his war-bag and hie himself out of the woods.

If he could run the crew all right, if he could win the men to him and hold their respect as he now held it, through the test that was coming, he had no fear that Bart, Wah Song, French Jimmy, or any of Lowrey's forces would be able to prevent him from making the King Pines job a success. Bart had driven the camp by the sheer force and dominance that was in him; his every act had announced that he neither needed nor desired the coöperation or friendship of any of the men. They had been the cogs in the machine; Bart the motive power.

John realised that because of his inexperience, if for no other reason, such a course was closed to him, even if he had desired to follow. He had done what he had done simply because the great majority of the men were his friends. They had become his friends before they had known that he was to become their boss. He had one chance to win: that was to keep the friendship and respect of the men, and to do that he must show them that he was a proper boss.

Was it in him? Could he do it? He thought of Belle and vowed that he could—he would!

He laid his hand on the crew the minute that breakfast was over.

"You fellows"—he called a dozen men by name—"you work under Norby getting the buildings finished."

Another dozen were told off, under Brackett, who would have no top-loading to do until hauling commenced, to complete the work of clearing a road to the river. The rest of the crew, with the exception of the camp-men, he led promptly into the woods and had them at the spot where the logging was to begin, at the point in the Pines farthest from the river, as daylight ap-

peared. The crew, close to fifty men in all, was scattered on both sides of the new-made road, each pair of sawyers far enough from their neighbours to prevent any interference or danger from falling trees.

"Let her go!" shouted John at the top of his voice and instantly twenty saws rasped into as many big pines, each pair of sawyers striving eagerly for the honour of felling the first.

From his place in the cutter beside Nels, Wolf John watched with the light flaming in his old eyes as the *whish-whish, whish-whish* of speeding saws filled the woods.

Presently near the road there came simultaneously from three pairs of throats the triumphant, "Look out!" Three saws clanged as they were hastily withdrawn from the cuts they had made; and three great trees wavered slightly, leaned over, and presently, *"Who-o-osshh—Boom!"* their trunks roared as they struck the ground.

"First timber!" claimed three pairs of voices again; and without any more delay the sawyers leaped forward, measured off the first cut, and instantly the saws were ripping their way through the prostrate trunks.

"First saw-log!" triumphantly announced the pair nearest the road as they completed the first cut some seconds ahead of their rivals. Then it was *"Whoo-oosshh—Boom!"* every few seconds as other trees announced that they were on the way to become lumber, and the day's work was on in earnest.

Wolf John turned away from the scene of activity with something like a sigh.

"Well, we've seen the beginning of the job even if we don't see the end," he said. "Take me back to Home Camp, Nels. I'm through in the woods. I'm only fit to stay at home and sign checks and have little Belle make a fuss over me. Go ahead."

But before they drove away John managed to whisper

a few words in Nels' ear. So Nels as he drove his master toward Peabody Point that morning recalled over and over again that he had been particularly ordered to see Belle Peabody with his own eyes and to ask her if there was, perchance, any word to carry to the new boss.

John looked at his watch as the cutter went out of sight. It was near to seven-thirty. Nels would probably stay at the Point for lunch. By starting back immediately after noon he should be back in camp by three. Until then John knew he would be on tenter-hooks, for, in spite of the energy with which he had thrown himself into the work of getting the crews started, there had not been a moment since Sunday evening when he had not been troubled by the question: Did Belle reach home in safety?

At three-thirty in the afternoon he grew impatient and returned to camp. Nels had not appeared. John hurried down to where Brackett and his crew were completing the stretch of road toward the river and spent an hour with them before returning to camp. It was four-thirty then, and still no Nels came.

Darkness fell. The men came trooping in from the timber, buildings gleamed with light, lanterns flickered about the stables; the first day in King Pines had passed successfully—but Nels did not come.

The men trooped in to supper, finished their meal, lounged into the bunk-house, lighted their pipes, played cards, yawned, knocked out pipes, put away cards, dimmed the lights and went to their bunks. The camp grew dark and still. John was the only one who had not gone to rest, and he paced restlessly in his little office, regularly stepping out into the biting cold to listen for any sign of Nels' coming, and growing more worried with each time that he listened in vain.

It was midnight when Nels came driving in. John, waiting for him at the stable door, fought and controlled

the feelings that were troubling him, and greeted him with a casual, "Well?"

Nels stepped stiffly from the sleigh, stamped about and beat his hands together without replying. Though his hands trembled, John lighted the stable-lantern hanging near the wall and held it up to the little man's face.

"What is it?" he demanded. Then he changed to, "Put the horse in and we'll go into the office where it's warm."

In the little office Nels took the mittens from his cold hands, opened his mackinaw and from the pocket of his shirt handed John a slip of paper. John hurriedly read the few lines of hastily scribbled writing:

Nels will tell you what's happened. Uncle John sends you this word: "Don't bother about me; get out the logs." Good luck. BELLE.

John turned his eyes from the paper to Nels. The old man had seated himself and was looking hard at the floor.

"Well?" said John. "What's happened?"

Nels slowly pulled at his frozen moustache.

"Well," he said, "I guess they've got old Wolf John."

"What!"

"Bart came down to the Point—to the office—just after me'n the old man drove in," continued Nels. "He come down to get his pay. He walked right in—you've got to admit that the devil has the bones of a man in him."

"Go on—go on! For God's sake, what happened?"

"It was a funny thing." Nels shook his head as if still puzzling about the scene he was describing. "The old man was sitting at his desk and Bart steps in and closes the door—you know that way he's got of being some place without you seeing him move. Well, the old man looked up and see him standing there, and for a minute they just looked at each other.

"'Good morning, Wolf John,' says Bart. 'I've come after my check.'

"The old man don't answer right away. 'Bart,' he says after a while, 'I should think you'd be afraid to try it.'

"Bart smiled a little. 'Afraid?' he says. 'It's a long time since I was afraid of anything, Wolf John.'

"'And it's a long time since any man dared face me in my own office after giving me lip in my own camp,' the old man said.

"'I dare,' says Bart. 'You see me here, don't you?'

"The old man looks him over careful. 'How's your gunman, Bart?' he says. 'Did you forget Nels when you sent him down to lay for me?'

"'Curly Joe needs no sending by me,' says Bart. 'His grudge against you is a killing grudge without anybody urging him on.'

"I cut in then. 'I'm shooting a little better than usual, Bull Bart,' I says, 'and I'd just as leave pull trigger with the sights on the left breast of your mackinaw as on the fore part of a buck,' I says.

"'Shut up,' says the old man to me. 'What have you come here for, Bart? It isn't merely for your check; you wouldn't run chances like this for that. Spit it out, man; I've got no pleasure in laying eyes on you.'

"'It's this,' says Bart. 'I come down here because I want you to know that I'm a white man, and when I fight I fight white-man's fashion, and I did not have anything to do with kidnapping Belle, and that as soon as Wah Song told me I smashed his face and went out to send her safe back home.'

"The old man's face turns kind of grey as he hears this, and his mouth stays open and he gasps kind of like a fish out of water.

"When he speaks it's just a whisper of his old self.

"'Belle?' he says. 'Kidnapped—Belle?'

"Bart was surprised himself at this. Then he laughs. 'Oh, ho. You haven't heard about it, eh?' he says. 'Yes, yes; Belle was kidnapped Sunday, by Wah Song's orders. The fool thought he'd do me a favour, thought I'd keep her hidden on you and make you quit on the King Pines to get her back.' He leaned over toward the old man. 'Wolf John,' he says, 'I don't need to go stealing women, and I don't need to fight with 'em. I come to tell you that I'm going to break up your camp in the Pines without any yellow tricks like that. Now, give me my check!'

"The old man kept kind of gagging in his throat as if he was trying to say something and couldn't. 'Belle!' he kind of gasps, as if that was all he could think of. 'She's all right, I tell you,' says Bart. 'Yes, came home all right Sunday night,' says one of the boys in the office.

"Wolf John he starts to rise in his chair like something was pulling him up, and he clenched his fist and raised it to Bart, and then all of a sudden he grunts kind of and clutched at his left side, and down he slides into his chair and would have gone to the floor if the clerk hadn't caught him.

"Bart he kind of started to smile until he saw that my six-gun was pointing straight at his belly. 'You're closer to being dead meat right now than you ever were in your life, Bull Bart,' I says. 'Don't you so much as wiggle a finger. You pray for the old man to come to. If he don't you die right where you stand.'"

Nels paused and shook his head.

"He's a man, that devil, even if he is all wrong. He gave me eye for eye and saw that I meant it, and yet he stands right there without turning colour or moving an eye, as easy as if the whole thing was play to him. I don't know how long I sat there with the gun on him. I didn't take my eyes off him, didn't look at the old

man. 'Is he alive?' I says. 'I don't know,' says the boys. 'Start praying, Bart,' I said. He just smiled.

"Well, the boys run around and did what was needed —they knew what to do—and then they telephoned for the doctor, and by the time he come, one of the boys says, 'He's coming to.'

" 'Is he going to live?' I says to the doctor. He said he was, but that we'd have to get him up the hill to bed. 'Bart,' I says, 'there's a lot of room in these woods. You go out and help yourself to your share of it, and stay there. Because next time you and I see each other it's only a question of who shoots first, and I can beat you at that with one hand tied behind me. The door's behind you—hike!'

"Bart, he smiled again and looked at the old man down on the floor. 'Well,' he said, 'that saves me a lot of trouble. That leaves only that young fool, Mud, to run the camp,' he says. 'I'll sew up the job before he knows what's happening.' 'Hike,' I said. He went to the door and stood and looked back. 'Tell Mud there's a Company horse and cutter up at the Falls,' he says. 'Maybe he wants to come up after 'em.' Then he went. He was laughing."

"What of Wolf John?" demanded John impatiently.

"Well, we fixed him up on a blanket and carried him up to the house and put him to bed. Miss Belle she turned white, but never a whimper out of her when she saw him. She saw to him. He opened his eyes just as soon as he felt her hand on his forehead— By Heavens! John, if the boys knew about Miss Belle being kidnapped they'd walk over to Whisky Falls to-night and lynch Wah Song and every mother's son that had a hand in it."

"I know it," said John. "That's why you're going to keep your mouth shut. The boys are paid for get-

ting out saw-logs, not for getting shot up at a lynching-bee. Go on; how did Wolf John make out?"

"Oh, fairly, fairly, considering that he'd dropped like a dead man. The doctor gave Miss Belle his orders, short and sweet. Stay in bed and rest, perfectly quiet, do nothing, worry about nothing, take his medicine, and obey orders, and he'll last for a spell. Get up and try to do anything and he'll have another stroke, and that's his finish. I stayed as long as I could, and he came to pretty good just before I left. He sent a few words to you, I understand?"

John read aloud Wolf John's message in Belle's note.

Nels nodded.

"I had a long talk with Miss Belle alone up at the house," he said. He looked sideways at John. "So you mixed with Bull Bart, eh? Yes; Miss Belle told me about Sunday evening over at that shanty. Why in the devil did you go alone? And not a piece of shooting-iron on you. To-morrow you begin packing one of my six-guns. You will, or I'll take it that you've got the swell-head too much to take advice from old Nels."

"You know better than that," said John.

"All right then. To-morrow I'll begin showing you a few tricks about six-guns. I noticed the butt of Bart's under his pants' band, but he didn't have a chance to get his hand near it. You've got to have the jump on that black devil if you want an even break. How in the devil did they get that mare and cutter?"

John confided the story of the raid on the stable on Saturday night.

"Why did you say nothing about it?" asked Nels in surprise.

"For the same reason that I said nothing of their fooling Miss Belle into that shanty," replied John. "For the same reason that we aren't going to bother getting that horse back for yet awhile. My job here is to get

the logs out, and I'm not going to let anything stop or interfere with that job if I can help it. I don't want the men to get to thinking of anything else. That's why you're not to say a word about Miss Belle, about Wolf John, about the stables, about Bart, about anything that would interfere at all with keeping the crew working like a machine." Nels nodded.

"I see the idea. But Bart—you can bet that he'll make it his business to interfere, and that in mighty short order."

"When that comes," said John, "we'll try to take care of it. In the meantime, I think I'll put somebody else on the tote-team. The job for you from now on will be to spend your days hunting in the Pines up toward Whisky Falls—as you were doing Saturday. And nights there'll be a bunk rigged up for you close to the hay."

Nels wrinkled his old face into a colossal wink of great satisfaction.

"Jest what I was thinking," he said. "Though I don't suspect there'll be much hunting up that way for a while—not till Curly Joe's arm gets well, anyhow."

After Nels had gone John sat alone in the little office until the fire in the stove died out and the chill of the room woke him from his reveries. He was alone now. Wolf John was out of it. It was Bart and himself to a finish. Bart had beaten him in their fight. Could he make good his threat and "sew up the job"? Before he blew out the lantern and sought his bunk John reread Belle's note. He felt better as he saw the two last words —"Good luck!"

CHAPTER XXV

BART PLAYS A TRUMP

THE next day came and went, and the next and the next without sign or hint of interference from Bart. From daylight to dark the King Pines rang with the noise of their destruction. Norby and his crew had completed the erection of the camp buildings. Brackett's gang were through with the work of building a road. The complete crew now was in the woods, sawing and skidding, and there being little or no swamping required, the log piles at the skid-ways along the road grew with unprecedented rapidity.

At night the sprinkling-tank moved up and down the newly made road, the water freezing almost as soon as it struck the snow. By the third morning a narrow ribbon of solid grey ice divided the Pines in two parts, and the road by which the giant sleigh-loads of logs were to slip to their berth on the ice of the Brulé was ready.

The haul was short, the road sloped gently toward the river, and once a load was started, no matter how high Brackett piled the top, it did not stop until it swung up to the roll-ways on the river bank ready for unloading. Then the chains were taken off, gingerly the cant-hooks worked out a bottom log and, *boom-boom-boom!* Like a volley of cannon shots the logs went rolling down the bank, leaping and tumbling far out upon the solid, snow-covered ice.

By the night of the third day a single row of logs five deep spanned the river from bank to bank. By making

a hurried survey of the area cleared each day and of the total area of the Pines John estimated that the job should be completed and the logs lying on the ice waiting for the thaw to start them downstream before the middle of March—if Bart did not successfully interfere.

On Friday the young teamster who had been put on the tote-team in Nels' place came driving into camp just after dark, singing and howling in a manner to make the bobcats silent with envy. Whoopingly he pulled his sweating team up with a flourish, tumbled lightly to the ground and offered to fight any blankety-blank-blank man in camp.

"I'm bes' man'n camp!" he announced seriously. "Where'sh yer fight'n' man? Eh? Bring 'm out. Bring 'm out, I shay. I'm bes' man'n B-b-brulé ri'er. Don' b'lieve me? Here; take drink; that'll prove it. Hey! Whass matter, whass matter?"

The bottle was wrenched from his hand and smashed on the sleigh before his dulled senses could comprehend what was happening. The drunken leap which he made at his assailant was met with a straight blow in the chest which sent him stumbling to a seat in the snow.

"Whass matter?" he demanded, rising. "Think you c'n break my bot— Oh, h'llo, Boss; didn' rec'nise you."

He tried to slink off, but John's hand caught him by the shoulder and held and shook him.

"Where did you get it?" demanded John. "Out with it: where did you get that whisky?"

"Oh, frien' o' mine," hiccuped the youngster. "Frien' o' mine gave't to me. 'Charley,' he says, 'you're a good feller; I'm good feller. Have drink, Charley, s'he. Frien' o' mine."

"Where?"

"Oh, down road a piece. Nice feller. Out hunt'n'. Ga' me, bottle. Shay, Boss, can't I have bottle? Eh?"

John saw that the lad was too drunk to be questioned, and directing another man to take care of the team he walked away.

In the morning it was a very sick, very repentant young teamster, in strange contrast to the howling bad-man of the night before, who stood in John's office and looked at the floor. He was little more than a boy, wherefore his shame was very black, and he was unaccustomed to drinking, wherefore he was very ill.

"You know the rules," said John. "Anybody caught bringing whisky into camp gets his time."

The boy nodded without raising his eyes.

"I'll break that rule for you just once," John continued, "on one condition."

The boy looked up hopefully.

"Where and how did you get the whisky?"

"That was right what I told you last night, boss," stammered the guilty one. "A fellow hit me for a ride down the road, just below where we used to branch off for Main Camp. He gave me that booze."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. Never saw him before. He was out hunting."

"Where was he going?"

"Up to the Falls. He—he said he was staying up there."

"And you didn't know him—don't know anything more about it than that?"

The boy shuffled nervously.

"I got stewed after a couple drinks; that's all I remember."

"Well, you've lost your job as tote-teamster," said John, "but you can go out and be brush-monkey if you want to behave. If you don't, if you think you'd rather have booze than your job, you can have your time now. Which shall it be?"

"I want to keep my job," came the grateful answer. "I never would have touched the stuff if he hadn't handed it to me when I was cold."

"All right, son," said John, kindly. "Get out and get on the job. Keep away from the booze. There's lots of things more fun in than monkeying with that stuff."

The boy departed, shakily but speedily, and John turned his attention to straightening up the camp accounts for the week. He worked an hour on his records, then hurried out to make the rounds among the men. The crew was by this time scattered through the woods in a rough line extending a mile and a half on either side of the camp. Thus it was impossible constantly to oversee the work of more than a few of the men near camp. John made it a rule to look over the entire crew at least twice a day, including the teamster on the road and the men at the roll-ways on the river.

This morning he went faithfully from one end of the line to the other, then hurried back to the road, looked over the hauling and finished by a visit to the roll-ways. It was bitter cold—three-shirt weather, with a vengeance—but the hardened, warmly clad lumber-jacks were not allowing the cold to interfere with their work. Apparently everything was all right. John hurried back to the office and resumed his bookkeeping.

At eleven o'clock his attention was drawn from the books by the sound of a logging-sleigh, coming in slowly from the woods. John sprang to the door and looked out. The sleigh bore a single layer of logs on which was thrown a heap of pine boughs, and on the boughs lay two men, one unconscious, the other writhing and groaning in pain. Sick at heart, John rushed to the sleigh as it pulled up to the bunk-house and recognised the two sawyers whom he had last spoken to on his tour of the woods.

"Donovan and Gavin—both good men in the woods—

don't see hownell they got it," said one of the men who had accompanied the sleigh.

Donovan, the older man, lay still on the boughs. Gavin, a small man, cursed and moaned.

"Take Donovan, you fellows," ordered John.

And as two of the men picked up the still figure and bore it into the warmth of the bunk-house John took Gavin in his arms and followed. As he laid him on a blanket on the floor the injured man coughed violently and the odour of his breath struck John full in the face. Gavin was drunk; his breath reeked with the smell of whisky.

John bent quickly over Donovan. The man was breathing but faintly, but on his breath too was the taint of liquor. As John looked at him Donovan raised his head a foot from the floor, opened his eyes a little, clawed spasmodically at his crushed chest and dropped back with a rattle on the floor.

"He got the butt square in the chest," said one of the men. "It's a wonder he lived as long as he did."

"How did it happen?" snapped John, as they stripped Gavin to examine his injuries.

"A lodged tree," replied the teamster who had driven them in. "They dropped one that hit another tree and stuck. Then they pried her loose at the butt. Can't understand it; two good men like them doing that. She jumped back on 'em before they could get out of the way. Donovan was right in front of the butt, so he got it bad. Gavin was kind of scraped on one side."

A hasty examination showed that this was true. Gavin's left arm was broken and from his shoulder down, his side was bruised and torn cruelly.

"Get the team of drivers and the light sleigh ready—in a hurry!" commanded John, binding up the man's injuries as best he could. "Get a lot of blankets and

throw in the sleigh, one of you, while some one gets the team ready."

By the time he had stanched the flow of blood from Gavin's wounds the sleigh came whirling up to the door. The injured man was made as comfortable as possible in the seat beside the driver. Then in the back of the sleigh, carefully bundled in blankets, went what was left of poor Donovan.

"Don't think of your team," said John to the driver. "Drive every step of the road. Get to the Point as quick as you can regardless of consequences. Get away!"

The whip cracked, the horses leaped forward and the sleigh sped down the tote-road out of sight and hearing.

"Poor Donovan," said the men, and went back to their work in the woods.

The horror of the event had left John sick and weak. Accidents—even fatal accidents—he knew were inevitable in the woods. But Donovan and Gavin had been drinking. Old lumber-jacks as they were, they would never have committed the fatal error of prying loose the butt of a lodged tree unless their minds had been befuddled by whisky. They had been sober when he spoke to them in the morning. There was no whisky in camp. Gavin and Donovan must have got the liquor that killed one and crippled the other after he had made his rounds that morning.

With rage and horror in his heart John set off through the woods for the scene of the accident. He avoided the men as he went and reached the place alone. A score of feet had tracked out the signs of the tragedy, but John began to search the place carefully, and eventually was rewarded by finding an empty bottle, carelessly buried in the snow. He knew that somebody must have brought the whisky to the men and he set out to search for tracks that might tell the tale.

To his surprise he found the marks of a single pair

of skees running from where the two men had been sawing in a straight line for Whisky Falls. Back-tracking, he found that the skee-runner had come from the direction in which his crew was working. He followed the tracks back until he came to the next pair of sawyers who happened to be two of the men who had helped him in the fight in the stables on Christmas Day.

"Who came through on skees, boys?" he asked, after the accident had been discussed.

"A fellow who'd been hunting over in the swamp," was the reply. "He was going through up to the Falls."

"Did he have anything to drink?"

"He offered us a drink," said one of the men. "We ain't neither of us drinking, so he went along."

As John continued on to the next pair of sawyers he heard shouting and laughing, and as he came upon them he saw that they had been drinking. John remembered the pair as belonging to the party that had come to camp drunk on Christmas Day.

"Fellow came through and gave us a touch out of a bottle," they explained. "Hain't got no objection to a man taking one snort on a cold day like this, have you, Boss?"

"Not if you only take one," said John. "Who was the fellow who gave it to you?"

The men looked at each other. Then one spoke boldly.

"Well, he was tending bar in Wah Song's Christmas. He says he's laying off to hunt nowadays."

"All right," said John. "Now listen, boys: Donovan was just killed and Gavin was crippled on account of being drunk on the whisky that fellow gave them. After this the man who takes a drink in this crew, no matter who brings the stuff in, is going to get his time. More than half of the crew never drink at all. I'd rather tackle the job with those sober men alone than have a lot of booze-fighters spoiling things. You make up your

mind what you want to do; but the next time you take a drink around here, out you go!"

He retraced his steps and followed the skee tracks toward the Falls. Near the edge of the Pines he met Nels, who was coming back toward camp.

"Did you see him?" asked John, pointing to the tracks.

"I did," said Nels. "I saw him first. It was Wah Song's bartender. He'd been hunting down on the swamp, he said, and was taking a short cut through."

John quickly related what had happened to Gavin and Donovan, and what he had heard from the men who had accepted the hunter's invitation to drink. As Nels listened, his jaws tightened and he shifted his rifle from one arm to the other.

"The sneaking —— —— ——!" he said softly. "So that's their game now, is it? I knew Bart would be cooking up something. Slipping whisky to the crew! Trust Bart to cook up something good. He knows that the drinking men who get a taste of booze in this cold weather will be crazy to get more. Yes, he's a fox, Bull Bart is. I should have plugged him down there in the office."

"How did that man get down in the Pines?" asked John. "He didn't pass you, of course?"

"You bet he didn't. If he had come this way Donovan would be living yet. He must have gone down below the Pines on the other side of the river. Then he swung across, came up the swamp and hit the men working farthest from camp on his way back to the Falls."

"And I suppose that's Bart's scheme now," said John, speaking aloud his thoughts. "He'll be slipping the men whisky whenever there's a chance. Well, that's got to be stopped, or the job's a failure."

"Just so," said Nels seriously. "But how in the devil you're going to stop it I don't see. There's a lot of

country to cover; you can't keep a man from slipping in now and then with a few bottles."

"But we can make it darn risky to do it," said John grimly. "I've been thinking it over. There are about thirty men in camp who can't be trusted on the booze proposition. These fellows are nearly all paired off together. I'm going to break that up. I'm going to pair each one of the booze-fighters with one of the men that I can depend on. And I'm going to let each one of the sober men know that there'll be twenty-five dollars extra on his month's check if he helps us lay hands on any whisky peddler that comes near camp. What do you think of it, Nels?"

Nels shook his head in admiration.

"By golly!" he chuckled. "I think maybe Bull Bart ain't the foxiest man in the woods, after all."

CHAPTER XXVI

A VISIT TO PEABODY POINT

JOHN knew that it would be impossible to keep all the men in camp that Saturday night and Sunday. Because they had worked the Sunday before, the wilder portion of the crew was fairly clamouring for the release and excitement which would come with the close of Saturday's work.

Though John realised that when his men went to Whisky Falls they would be in the hands of Bart and Wah Song and that Bart undoubtedly was figuring on the regular Saturday night spree of the men as an opportunity for crippling the camp, he had seen enough of the lumber-jacks by this time to know that to attempt to hold them in camp would mean a riot and failure. He was under obligations to the men for having worked last Sunday, and there was nothing to do but to let those go who wished to go. At noon he said briefly to the men as they ate:

"You've all heard of what happened to Donovan and Gavin, boys. You know a couple of good men like them wouldn't have monkeyed around the butt of a lodged tree if they'd been in their right senses. They weren't in their right senses; they were drunk. The Company hasn't got anything to say about what you boys do away from camp, but it has here.

"Any man bringing whisky into camp is doing the Company dirt and doing every man in camp dirt by hurting the job. Any man bringing whisky back with him

to-night or Sunday, or who isn't in shape to go to work Monday morning, will get his time. Now remember that, you fellows who're going to the Falls to-night."

The tragic accident of the day had no depressing effect upon the men bent upon celebrating that evening. Rather it excited them.

"Man can't tell when he's going to get it. Better have a good time while you last."

Twenty-five of them drew small sums on their pay when they came in from the woods at dark and after supper they set out through the nipping cold for Whisky Falls.

John watched them go with deep misgivings. Though he knew that not one of them had in their hearts the least liking for Bart, and therefore Bart could win no hold on them in their right senses, he realised that in whisky and vice Bart and Wah Song possessed the two allies that could rouse the devil in these reckless woodsmen and tempt them where proffers of money and advantage would be met with jeers.

"And you cannot keep them away from it," said Norby, with whom John talked it over. "All over the world I have seen it—the fine young fellows with the square shoulders and the bright eyes, they're the ones who throw themselves away, as I did when I was young and the whole world was before me. Bart will try to get those boys away from this camp some way. We will see if he can break the hold you've already got on them."

To John's surprise and relief, a dozen of the men were back in camp shortly after midnight. He recognised them as men who, though they were hard drinkers and had been in the fight against him at the stables, he counted as among his best friends in camp.

They had all been drinking, but their potations had not carried them beyond the stage of careless good humour. The two sawyers who had confessed to drink-

ing in the woods that day were among them. As they saw the light in the office where John was sitting, the men halted and put their heads together in consultation. Presently the two sawyers came over to the office.

"No booze in this crowd, Boss John," said one. "Every man frisked himself and there isn't a bottle in the gang."

"Good work," said John. "How does it happen you're back so early?"

"Oh, we agreed when we went up that we'd get back to-night," was the reply. "So none of us drank any more'n he could hold."

"Yes," chimed in the second man, "and Bart and Wah Song were darn sociable and friendly. Gosh! Any time the Chineser would see you without a glass in his hand he'd tell the barkeep to give you a drink on him. The logging was too good; we got suspicious and took cigars."

"The rest of the boys will be laid out stiff," added the first man as they left. "They didn't have better sense than to let Wah Song fill 'em up in a hurry."

This prediction proved true only in a degree. During the rest of the night five more men came straggling into camp, and next morning a sixth one appeared with the rising sun.

"Where are the rest of the boys?" asked John, when the man had steadied himself slightly with huge drafts of black coffee.

"Oh, they're gone, gone," muttered the man.

"Gone where?"

"Spirit Lake—Spirit Lake—on spree! Wah Song's barkeep got sleigh; made up party. Spirit Lake—spree. Not me; too foxy for'm. Boys—all laid out. Can't drink with me. Ooh! My head!"

John understood. Spirit Lake lay twenty miles eastward from the Falls. Its River Front saloon was known far and wide through the Big Woods. The seven men

who had gone, or rather been taken, to Spirit Lake might be back at the end of a week—they might not be back at all. With Donovan and Gavin this made nine men that he had lost, and as a full crew working every day was necessary to the success of the job, John saw that he must find new help.

"Hook up the drivers, Nels," he ordered after breakfast. "We'll have to go down to the Point to look for some more men."

He dressed himself with particular care for a foreman merely bent upon seeking workmen. He even had Dugan come into the office and trim his hair. And Dugan expressed the bold opinion that this was foolishness.

"In this cold weather leave all your hair on," he advised. "When I get grown I'm going to let my whiskers grow all Winter, like Norby."

John and Nels drove to the Point as swiftly as they could without hurting the horses, the twenty below zero making the drive anything but a pleasure. At the Point, John at once hunted up the mill superintendent and told him his needs.

"Get me ten new men," he directed. "I've got to have them or fall down on the job."

"Then you've got to fall down," retorted the superintendent grimly.

"Why?"

"Because Bull Bart has been raking the woods and settlements around here, and he's hired every man he could get to go over to the big Lowrey camp over the other side of Spirit Lake. He's offering five dollars a month better than we're paying. You can't hire a lumber-jack within fifty miles of here."

John took the news without change of countenance, but within he felt a shock that told that the blow had registered. So that was Bart's game. That was how he was going to make good his threat of sewing up the job in

the Pines—and with the money and resources of the Lowrey interests behind him.

"I see," said John quietly. "Are there any men in the settlement here who can pull a saw?"

The superintendent smiled.

"Well, there's me, for instance; and there's old Doctor Dean; and there's the two boys in the office. I think the four of us might do half a man's work if you drove us hard. Outside of that there's nothing but the women and kids. No, I'd have sent you two men to take Donovan and Gavin's places if I could have got 'em any way at all."

John turned away with a new line of worry between his eyes. He walked with heavy feet and hanging head toward the walk leading up to the house of his uncle.

"Oh ho, Cousin John!"

He looked up, his sense of depression fleeing at the thrill of hearing Belle's voice. She was coming down the hill, running so swiftly that her hair flowed back over her shoulders, and bearing in her hands a steaming dish.

"It's broth for poor Gavin," she said as she came up to him. "Come with me; I must get it to him before it gets cooled."

She sped away again and John followed to the old Company doctor's house on the mill-pond, where Gavin was comfortably lodged in bed.

"Bless yer hairt, Miss Peabody!" mumbled the helpless man as Belle flung open the door. "Do ye be havin' time to make broth fer a fool loike me?"

"How are you coming on, Gavin?" asked John.

Gavin looked up in surprise and turned his eyes away in shame. He did not speak or look again at John until Belle had placed the bowl convenient to his sound right arm.

"Well, boss," he quavered, "Donovan—the saints rest him—an' me paid hard enough for being —— fools."

"It was hard luck, Gavin," said John. "The boys were all asking for you. I hope you're coming along all right."

"Did ye know—" said Gavin, looking up—"did ye know how it happened?"

"I know. I know all about it. Don't worry about that. Get well as quick as you can."

"A bottle an' two —— fools," said Gavin doggedly. "Well, we paid fer't, boss, hard enough. But, th' saints willing, I'll not be layin' here long. Nothin' but me arm, the doctor says. I'll be back in camp in another week. Not that I'll be any good wit' th' saw th' rest of th' Winter. But a man can droive tote-team with wan good arm, boss, an' ye can put th' lad on th' tote-team on a saw to make up half th' sawing crew that whisky cost ye."

"Good boy, Gavin," said John, grasping his hand heartily. "Don't worry about it, but get on your feet as soon as you can. The boys all want to see you up again."

"Thank ye fer that, boss. An' bless ye, Miss Peabody, though I ain't worth the trouble you're takin' fer me, at all—at all!"

"And Uncle John?" said John, the moment Belle and he were out of the house. "How is he?"

"Oh, Cousin John!" she cried cheerfully. "I do believe you've saved his life."

"I? How in the world could I do that?"

She nodded, looking up at him as they walked briskly along.

"You have; if he lives, you are the one who has done it—you've done it all. You see, the doctor—the specialist—told him last Summer that he must give up his affairs if he wished to live much longer. He couldn't do that—until you came. And now, why, he sits back in his easy

chair and says he's going to take it easy for the rest of his days, because you are handling his fight against Lowrey's crowd better than he could himself.

"I had the big doctor from the city up just as soon as I could get a message to him. He just left this morning to get the evening train at Black Bear Lake. He says that if Uncle John will drop all worry, rest constantly, and do as I tell him, he may delay the next attack for ever so long. And Uncle John said: 'Yes, yes, doctor; I can do that now. I've got a big nephew of mine taking care of things for me.' Oh, Cousin John, I think it's fine, fine of you!"

John's face clouded.

"Suppose I should fail; suppose I should not be able to live up to his expectations in handling his affairs?"

They were climbing the hill now, and she looked at him quickly, instantly conscious of the seriousness of his meaning.

"But you won't fail; I know you won't," she said stoutly. "What's troubling you, Cousin John?"

John told her of the disappearance of the seven men and what he had heard of Bart's latest activities. Her eyes flashed at the mention of Bart's name.

"But they won't beat you," she said. "They can't. The men are all loyal to you; I've been talking with Gavin, and I know. You've done wonders so far. Think of what you've done, and you'll feel as I do when I know they can't beat you. And even if they do," she added femininely, "you will have managed as well as any one could. But you're going to win; I know it."

In the hallway she held her finger up to her lips warningly.

"We haven't told him about Donovan and Gavin," she said. "You mustn't tell him about losing the seven men. Be—be cheerful, won't you, Cousin John?"

He looked at her and the clouds promptly fled from his face.

"That's right!" laughed Belle. "You were as black as a thunder-cloud a moment ago. Now, forget about everything that's been troubling you, and smile—that's right! And go in—quick while you're still smiling—and see Uncle John."

Smiling broadly, barely suppressing the laughter that bubbled up within him, and feeling much like a boy who has been cheerfully hustled about, John entered the library where Wolf John sat or rather lay comfortably ensconced in a huge reclining-chair, a book in his hands.

"Don't—don't on your life—ask me how I am," commanded the old man, carefully marking a place in the book. "And don't dare to bother me with any questions or details about the job. I know things are all right by your face, and little Belle has got me bluffed till I daren't even remember that I'm in the logging business. You're the boss now; I'm a comfortable dead-head, just lolling around in the back-water."

In spite of this, however, he managed to ask half a dozen pertinent questions concerning the job. John remembered Belle's injunction, so when, immediately after luncheon, he left to drive back to camp he left Wolf John serenely buried in his book, satisfied with John's white falsehoods that the job was running as smoothly as could be, that not even a cloud appeared on the horizon to indicate possible trouble.

"I'll have to beat them somehow now, won't I?" said John to Belle as she came out to bid him good-by. "If I should fall down after this, the shock would be more than he could stand."

"You will beat them, Cousin John," she said, as if it were something that she was quite certain of. "I know you will—just as I knew—or felt—that you were going to find me up there in that shanty on the bayou. And

now, you simply must make good! For if— But I won't speak of such possibilities. Good-by; and remember that I *know* you won't fall down."

"Well," he said as he drove away, "that makes two reasons why I've got to make good. And I'll never show up here again unless I do."

CHAPTER XXVII

TRAPPED FOXES

JOHN had planned to be back in camp before dark, for though he trusted fully Norby, Brackett, Burns, and the other dependable men left in charge of the camp, he had no intention of slacking his personal vigilance. A late start and a loose shoe on one of the horses delayed his arrival, so when Nels finally pulled up before the camp stables it was after supper-time. From the bunk-house came a noise of laughter and shouting that told John that something unusual was taking place, and, stiff and numb from the cold, he stamped his way in.

The bunk-house was crowded with every man in camp, and every man's face was wearing a grin. In a cleared space in one corner sat Norby, holding on one knee a pale, puffy youth who was a stranger to John. Norby held the man's two wrists behind him in the grip of one of his huge hands. With his other hand he tweaked an ear, exactly as a teacher might tweak the ear of a recalcitrant schoolboy. As John entered, the crowd shouted with glee.

"Here's the boss, Norby. The boss ain't heard his story. Make him tell it again, Norby; go ahead."

Norby bounced the man up and down on his knee. John, joining in the spirit of the men, awaited developments.

"Tell the boss that story, you tough whisky-pedlar," commanded Norby. "You see, boss, this bad-man here came up to Dugan and me while we were hunting up

toward the Falls this afternoon. Oh, he's a jolly fellow, boss. He sat down and told us a funny story right away. Then he pulled out a quart bottle and said, 'Have a drink on that.' So Dugan took the bottle. 'You haven't got a little more on you that you'd sell a fellow for the boys back in camp, have you?' I said. Then he pulled out two more quart bottles. So I said, 'Come with me and tell the boys that story,' and Dugan smashed the bottles and I tucked him under my arm and carried him in, and he has to tell the story to every man that comes in.

"It's a good story; he's a good talker, smart boy, this fellow. You want to hear it. Go ahead, tough whisky-pedlar; tell the story once more."

The man looked up appealingly to John, but John was in no mood to interfere with the men's fun. In a tone of weary resignation, as if dead tired of repeating the same words over and over again, and with a most sorrowful expression on his face, the victim began:

"Big, tough Swede named 'Box-Car Ole,' pulled saw in Lowrey's Camp Number Four, beyond Spirit Lake, some years ago. Went to town every Saturday night on spree, licked everybody who'd fight, tore uniform off policeman, and went back to camp singing. Toughest man in the woods.

"One night he came into town when there was a camp-meeting. Went in; got religion. Minister got him up in front and began to pray for him. Minister says: 'Oh, Lord, be with this poor, weak, helpless sinner to-night. To-night this poor, weak, helpless sinner will have his trial. To-night his Satanic Majesty will come and grapple with this poor, weak, helpless sinner. Yes, he will grapple with him—' 'Hol' on dere, Mester Prest,' says Box-Car Ole, 'ef dat Satanic Majesty faller grapple vid diss poor, veak, halplose sinner—he'll skoll need new foreman in deh morning.'"

John had heard the story—the incident really had occurred as described—several times since coming to the woods, but there was something so ludicrous about the dejected man's mechanical, sorrowful utterance that he could not resist joining in the shout of laughter with which the men greeted the end of the story. The puffy victim rolled his bleared eyes around helplessly. John felt an impulse to relent toward him, but he thought of Donovan and the impulse fled.

"So you're a whisky-pedlar, are you?" he said, eyeing the man. "You're in a fine business. Who is he, boys, do any of you know him?"

"Tin-horn gambler and hanger-on around Wah Song's," came the prompt reply.

"I suppose Bart sent you down?" John said.

The man made no reply. The defiance had been taken out of him by the torture of humiliation which the men had meted out to him, and he was as helpless as a child in Norby's grasp.

"Well, boys, what shall we do with him? It was one of his kind that killed poor Donovan. What do you say?"

"We've left it for you to say, boss," boomed Brackett. "Some of the boys was for riding him on a rail."

John looked at the unhealthy puffiness of the man, at Norby's huge shoulders, and had an inspiration.

"Boys, you know what that gang up there is after," he said. "They want to put this camp on the bum by taking men away from it. Donovan and Gavin are gone, and seven others, because of their rot-gut. Well, if they take men away from us they ought to be willing to give men up, when we lay hands on them. The fellow is going to take the place of one of the men that his gang got away from us. He's going to stay in camp and work. He's going to begin pulling saw with Norby to-morrow morning."

The men howled. They slapped one another on the back and roared with laughter. It was the perfect punishment; it was the poetry of justice. Sentenced to pull saw with Norby! The men looked at the pale, puffy youth and leaned against the bunks, weak from laughter.

"Norby, you will see that he doesn't get away," said John, as he turned to go to the cook-shack. "Don't bother him any more; just make sure he doesn't get away."

In spite of what was in prospect for him, the prisoner gave John a look of something like gratitude. He had feared that he might be made to repeat his story once more.

The men greeted Norby and his charge with cheers when they appeared together for breakfast in the morning. Norby never allowed the man to get farther than arm's reach away from him. He placed him at his side at the table; when he had eaten his breakfast he rose, taking the man with him. Linking his arm in his prisoner's he led the way into the woods, assuring him that though it might look easy to get away in the woods, he, Norby, would make it his business to see that in fact it would be very hard.

"Look at Norby all swelled up!" protested Brackett. "You needn't brag, Norby; I'm going to get me one of those, too."

"Me too, me too!" laughed others. "Norby, you needn't think you're the only man who can have a pet."

They went to their work still laughing at the spectacle presented by the wobegone whisky-pedlar in Norby's toils. And John took heart at the loyalty of his men. Bart was beaten on this move, he felt sure. With the men in this mood there would be no chance for Wah Song's whisky to disrupt the crew. John set out on his first round in better spirits, though the gap left by eight men gone made him thoughtful.

As he neared the roll-away on the river he heard a mighty shout and roars of laughter. Running forward, he saw the peavy men forming a circle out on the ice. In the circle Brackett and a stranger were fighting as if for dear life. As John leaped down the bank Brackett caught his opponent around the waist, threw him flat on the snow and sat on him.

"I got one, too, Boss!" he cried as he saw John. "The son-of-a-gun! I had to fight for mine, but I got him, and now he's coming back and help load. Norby ain't the only one."

John soon had the story. The man—a heavy-set, swarth fellow of evil countenance—had approached the lad who had been on the tote-team with an offer of liquor. The boy, recognising him as the man who had made him drunk on the road, had slipped away and informed Brackett. Brackett had chased the man a mile and a half through the woods, catching him on the river. Then they had fought, the man refusing to obey Brackett's command to come back and work.

"And now he's got to do it because I've showed him I'm best man," said Brackett, hoisting his victim to his feet. "Come on, you scum! I'll give you a chance to do something besides peddle whisky. That goes, don't it, Boss?"

John nodded.

"You took your chance," he said to the man, "now you've got to take your medicine. We can use about nine of your fellows as fast as Bull Bart and Wah Song will send them down."

"Think you're going to get any work out of me?" demanded the man. "Why, when Bart hears of this he'll be down here and clean you off the map."

"Watch that man close, Brackett," said John, paying no attention to the man. "I see he's a bad man. If he

gets rough, well, you've got my word to go as far as you like in taming him."

"You bet," said Brackett. "I can see he's a tough one by the look in his eye. We'll watch him. Grab hold, somebody. Now, come along, you, or I'll beat your head off."

Helpless between Brackett and another man the whisky-pedlar was led off into the woods, protesting and cursing at every step. The men cheered and went back to their work.

"Have a full crew again pretty soon, Boss, if they keep coming down here," they said.

And at noon they roared and howled with laughter; for as they were seating themselves in the cook-shack Nels came into camp marching at rifle point a third man from Whisky Falls, the man who had given Donovan and Gavin the whisky on Saturday morning. Surprise and terror showed plainly upon his face. He recoiled from the crowd of hairy, laughing faces that received him into camp, felt Nels' rifle barrel in the small of his back and stood stock-still, numbed and dumb with fright.

"He didn't have only a quart on him," said Nels. "He said he was out looking for a couple of the boys from the Falls who'd gone out in the bush and hadn't got back. I told him to come with me and he'd find them."

The man at last managed to speak.

"What do you fellows think you're going to do with me?"

"Going to make you work!" shouted a dozen men in reply. "We've got the right medicine for bloats like you."

"You can't do it," the man began to bluster, but just at that moment Norby came marching his new working partner toward the shack.

The youth looked sideways at the newcomer and with hanging head marched past without a word. Brackett

and another man soon followed with the second prisoner. He likewise stalked meekly in to his meal. Nels' man wet his lips. He tried to speak. His tongue failed him.

"You'd better go in and get your dinner," said John. "You're going to help the gang on the roll-ways this afternoon."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAUGH ON BART

THE joke was too big, too well fitted to the free humour of lumber-jacks, to keep. It spread over the Big Woods. It became a tradition, a tale which may be heard to this day around any camp-fire near the valley of the Brulé.

The tote-teamster carried it to Peabody Point that afternoon. From the Point it spread quickly. The telephone bore it to Black Bear Lake that evening. From thence the snow-laden wires hummed it on its way to Spirit Lake. Spirit Lake radiated it far and wide over the snows. Within three days, wherever news went, men were laughing over the joke that Peabody's King Pines Camp had played on the whisky-pedlars from Whisky Falls.

The camp became famous in a few days. The lumber-jacks of the region, more eager for fun than for dollars, envied the crew that had perpetrated the coup. The seven men from the camp who were still at Spirit Falls became objects of attention. It was worth something to be able to say that one was of the King Pines Camp. Four of the seven, the four who had somehow managed to sober up, realised that they were missing the opportunity to share in the glory of their old camp.

In the darkness of night they slipped away from the notice of Wah Song's bartender who had carried them to Spirit Lake, and struck out over the twenty cold miles leading back to camp. There they sheepishly told a story

of being drugged and kidnapped against their will. John listened without comment.

"All right, boys," he said when the explanations were finished. "That's all past. The question is now: Do you intend to put in your full time at this camp until the job's finished; or do you intend to lose more time, as you have this week? If you aren't going to stick, don't start working at all, because if you do the Company dirt you won't get a cent of money till this job's done. Understand? If you come back you come back for the whole time of the job."

"All right, Boss," they said, and hurried to hear from their more fortunate fellows the details of the story that was making the whole region laugh.

The story promptly travelled to Whisky Falls and reached Bart. It came, bearing the news that the whole woods were laughing at the fashion in which young Peabody had turned the tables on his enemies. It told Bart and Wah Song that the men of the woods for fifty miles around were laughing at them, and Whisky Falls promptly became a sullen hell full of smouldering rage.

"I tellee you him Mud big man," muttered Wah Song. "Lettee me hide woman, keep woman in shlanty, makee him thlow up job. No lettee me do; now look-see what you catchee."

"Close your yellow trap," commanded Bart. "I'll take care of that fool down there. He's got too much nerve to live—putting the laugh on me like this. Curly Joe's arm will be well next week. Now, don't let me hear any more of your whining."

News of this conversation came to John by word of mouth of men who had been at Whisky Falls. Bart was raving during the days immediately after news had come of John's coup. He had begun to drink hard, though it was traditional that liquor never affected him except to

make him quiet and dangerous. Men came to the Falls, bought drinks, lounged carelessly around and, casually, led the conversation around to the fate of Wah Song's whisky-pedlars.

Then the beast in Bart flared up unrestrained. Two men who had been careless enough to mention the subject in his hearing went away from the Falls with their physiognomies beaten and kicked out of all human semblance. They were young men and the need for revenge rose large within them.

Thrown out of Wah Song's, they made their way to the Peabody Camp, the camp that had come to stand as the camp of the enemies of the gang at Whisky Falls. Here they told all they had heard from Bart. Then they went to work, John promising them that if Bart brought about a clash they would be given the opportunity to secure the revenge which they craved.

The word went around through the woods that Bart had met his match. In the years that he had acted as Wolf John's foreman, Bart by his brutality had made many warm enemies. Men who had hated him and feared him now heard what had happened and ceased to fear him.

In spite of the mill superintendent's statement that Bart had hired every lumber-jack in the region for the Lowrey camp, there came drifting into the King Pines Camp now, day by day, by ones and twos, in all a dozen men who were anxious to be on the scene if there was a chance that Bart was to get his deserts. By Saturday John had a full crew again, and that evening he gave each of the captured whisky-pedlars a check for a full week's pay and told them that they were free to go.

The men shuffled nervously when the checks were offered them. Presently they blurted out their decision: they were afraid to go back to the Falls, the camp was

the one place where they were safe from Bart's rage, and they wanted to remain.

"All right," said John. "But if you hire out, remember you're hiring out for the full length of the job—over two months."

"That's all right," said one man. "By that time we'll have enough coming to take us to where Bart can't get at us."

Only a few of the men went to Whisky Falls that Saturday night. These returned before midnight with two of their number fit subjects for the hospital. Bart had been drinking, the men said. He was raving. The two injured men had been unfortunate enough to mention the pedlars in his hearing, and Bart had followed his custom, had jumped on them, beaten and kicked them into insensibility and hurled them out into the snow.

John felt sorry for the men when he saw their mutilated faces, but on afterthought he felt grimly glad of Bart's brutality. It would have a two-fold effect: the men would have a grudge against Bart, and they would keep away from Whisky Falls.

CHAPTER XXIX

MID-WINTER

AND now mid-Winter clamped its icy hands upon the Big Woods and held them in a grip remorseless. The world gave up its fight to appear a living, pulsing thing and lay stiff-frozen and dead, numbed under the pressure of thirty below. Each day the mercury dropped a little lower, each day the mastery of the frost devils became a little more stern. The sun, too far away to reach earth with its heat-rays, shone brightly, a ball of light which, save for a brief space after noon, was helpless against the frost-pall which covered the woods.

In the woods the snow lay crystal-like, white and hard, unsoftened by the sun's best efforts. On lakes and rivers, beneath the snow, the ice lay flint-like. The ice-road through the Pines was a ribbon of grey steel from which the long, sharp calks of horseshoes struck showers of tiny, brittle splinters.

It was mid-Winter. Wolves, bobcats, lynxes gave up their nightly meat-hunting and slunk to their caves, curling themselves up, waiting impatiently for the days when the sun, drawing nearer, would warm earth to a degree where living things once more could walk abroad. In the brush the spruce-hens burrowed deep in the snow beneath the cedar bushes, and the deer, close-huddled for warmth, grew lean in the bare swamps where they yarded.

Out-of-doors was an enemy to man. It fought him the moment he stepped out from the shelter of four

walls. It leaped upon him, striving to clog the blood in his veins, forcing him into brisk motion to keep the mere breath of life in his body.

In the morning the men came from the warm bunk-house into the biting cold, swore, thrashed their arms and ran to the cook-shack. From the cook-shack they ran to their work in the woods, the stables or the roll-ways. To stand still was to freeze, to let the frost devils win. To work at top speed, burning the heavy-fuel meals under forced draft, was the one way to make outdoor life endurable. From their work the men ran back to camp.

A few of the younger, incredibly endowed with animal spirits and resistance, frolicked as usual, rolling each other in the snow, jeering at the one who admitted frost-bite. The majority of the crew, however, hurried for the shelter of four walls and the warmth of fires without delay. Mid-Winter had laid its icy hands upon their spirits as well as their veins.

"She's going to be another hard one," they said as they greeted the cold in the morning. And, "She was a hard one, all right," when the harsh day was over.

Those are the days—when all out-of-doors is a place to flee from the moment work is dropped, and many men must herd together without entertainment through hours each day—that tempers grow frayed and sullen in logging-camps, and short words, blows, and even worse are to be expected as a matter of course. Then, if ever, the camp boss is tested to his marrow. Upon his ability to dominate the rough men under him, to note and quench trouble before it breaks, and to keep his men satisfied when dissatisfaction is the natural state of mind, depends the success of the job, even his own life and the lives of some of his men.

The Canadian poet-logger, Dr. Drummond, who made it obligatory on the successful applicant for work in his camp to answer affirmatively at least one of the four

questions: Can you sing, play any instrument, dance a jig, or spin a yarn? knew well what such accomplishments meant to the frost-bound camps.

In this respect John was as good as any dozen men in camp. He could tinkle satisfactorily on the old guitar, and he could sing songs by the hour. The whisky-pedlar captured by Norby turned out to be a really excellent story-teller, and on Dugan's flaming head rested the honour of being called "the best two-handed liar in forty miles." Each night John sought to have something going in the bunk-house immediately after the men had gathered from the evening meal. Yet even his watchfulness did not wholly avail.

One evening a shot brought him rushing furiously in to see one crowd of men holding a man in his bunk, while another sought to conceal the rifle that had fired the shot. A dropping of dust from the board ceiling told that the barrel had been knocked up in time.

"Accident," they said. "Pete's gun went off when he was moving it."

Another time he rushed in at the sound of voices raised in curses, and found two men rolling on the floor, struggling for a long knife. Fist fights were common. Brackett and Norby fell out one night over a mild argument concerning what became of the antlers shed by bucks and it took half the crew to keep the two Titans apart and half an hour's hard talking on John's part to make them shake hands. Men began to lay up silent grudges against one another, all of which were to be settled when the drive was down and they met in town. But—they got out the logs.

In spite of the cold, which slowed the blood up and made the muscles stiff, in spite of the feuds and grudges growing daily among the men, the work of converting the King Pines into saw-logs went on at a satisfactory rate.

To fight the cold weather and beat it was a matter of pride with the lumber-jacks. They were Snow Country men; they knew that no man has any business in the North who can not whip the frost devils; and they increased rather than lessened their efforts when the bone-searching cold would have driven less hardened men to hug the fire. Their fighting and bickering they reserved for the idle hours after the evening meal; they never allowed their feuds to interfere with the day's work. A man might be bent over a saw, knowing well that his best enemy was working behind him with a sharp two-bitted ax in his hands, but he pulled away undisturbed, knowing well that the enemy would not use the ax, at least not until the job was done.

It was his load-tally sheet that kept John strong through this trying period. Each day he awakened with a fear that before the camp went to bed again the raw tempers of the men would bring about a tragedy. Each day he sensed that his hold on his men was not the hold that he had held when the weather was more pleasant and the men in their normal mood of friendliness and good nature. They were not working their best now for loyalty to him, but because they had fallen into the habit of giving the best that was in them. Their attitude toward him no longer was one of chummy respectfulness. He was the Boss now, and the Boss only. And the lines grew deeper on the sides of John's mouth as he realised how slender was his hold, and that once it was broken the camp would be a bedlam of discord, rupture and ruin.

By day he watched the men closely, and he wondered at his success in keeping his sway over them. But at night, when the load-tally came from the roll-ways, he had his moment of triumph. For each day was a success. He was doing what he had set out to do. The ice-covered Brulé was being slowly but steadily choked with logs from bank to bank.

In the Pines the cut-over portion grew each day, like the falling of wheat beneath the harvester's scythe. If he could keep this up he would succeed. To succeed now had become an obsession with John.

The isolation of the camp, the absolute concentration on the task of making big trees into saw-logs, and of getting the logs on to the river ice, had done its work. There was nothing in the world but logs; nothing in the world for him to do but to get them out before the ice-roads broke up under soft weather. Bart and Wah Song and the gang from Whisky Falls had ceased to trouble. They were far away, and the trees and the cold were present. So John was completely wrapped up in the fight against the harsh, frost-bound forest.

"If we don't get soft weather before the tenth of March, we've got it beaten," he confided to Nels one evening in the office. "I have figured it out to a day. At the rate we are going we'll be within skidding distance of the river by March tenth."

"If Bart don't horn in," supplemented Nels dryly. "Have you heard the news? Curly Joe's started hunting again."

"What of it? You're hunting every day, aren't you? You've been looking for a shooting-match with him for weeks."

Nels shook his head.

"I guess you've been too busy to hear any news at all, eh?" he said. "Why d'you suppose Bart's been letting up on us? Think he's afraid? Think he's quit because we've beat him so far? Huh! If you do you don't know Bull Bart. Bart has got another grudge besides the one against the old man, now, and he's more set on settling that than on earning the money Lowrey's paying him to put this camp on the skids. He's out to get you, Bart is, boy, and he never went after anybody yet that he didn't get."

"What's this?" said John. "Have you heard something new?"

Nels nodded.

"One of the boys heard it when he was up to the Falls. He didn't want to say anything to you, of course, but that's the talk up there. Bart's drinking harder than ever. He says it wouldn't do you any good even if you should get the Pines down, because he's going to get you, whether he stops this job or not. I knew that, after you'd put the laugh on him."

"I expected it," agreed John, "but I didn't think he'd go talking about it."

"Too much red liquor," said Nels. "Even Bart can't keep a steady tongue when he's hitting it up the way they say he's doing now. What are you going to do about it?"

"Take care of each day's trouble as it comes. I've thought that over long ago. I don't see anything to do but to wait for his next move and try to beat him, the way we did on the whisky-pedlars."

"Well, I see something to do," snapped Nels. "I've been doing some thinking, too. Will you give me leave to clean Bart and his gang up, for good and all? I've got the way; just you say 'go ahead.'"

"What would you do?"

"What would I do?" repeated Nels hotly. "Why, I'd just whisper a word to the boys about Wah Song trying to steal Miss Belle, and they'd go up there and string Wah Song and Bart up and burn the place to the ground. That's the sure-shot weapon you've got against Bart. I know the boys; I know what they'd do if they knew. Say the word, and to-morrow morning there won't be any gang left up there—they won't be nothing."

A load seemed lifted from John's shoulders as he listened. The thing was solved; he had the weapon to

wipe the enemy out of existence. He knew well that what Nels said was true: the men would wipe out Whisky Falls as a nest of vermin if they knew of Wah Song's attempt to kidnap Belle. A man might do many things in the Woods, but that was a lynching proposition. It would solve the problem; the job would be safe.

"No," said John curtly, "I won't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because if Bart's out to get me, that's his fight and mine," said John. "And another thing, I don't want Miss Peabody's name brought into this at all."

"It's the sensible thing to do," persisted Nels. "Bart won't be squeamish about such things, you can bet on that. Curly Joe's arm is well again. Well, Curly Joe can't get at Wolf John, because he's sick in bed, but he might get at you. Now what do you say?"

"That your job in this camp is to shoot venison and take care of Curly Joe," replied John. "As for the rest —that's my lookout."

"But, boy—to talk plain—Curly Joe will shoot you on sight, without giving you a chance for your alley, if he can."

"Well, you're not to give him a chance, then," laughed John. "I've got enough confidence in your shooting, Nels, to be pretty brave."

Nels shook his head.

"It ain't the way to do," he growled. "The other's the way. But you're as stubborn as Wolf John himself when you set up to be, so I suppose you'll have your way. You pack your gun all the time now, don't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Huh! You'll see the day yet when you won't talk so careless about that. And remember, if you ever stack up against Bart, watch his hands, and nothing but his hands; watch 'em like a cat, because he's quick with one as the other."

"How many times have you told me that now, Nels?" said John with a smile.

"Never mind. I'll keep telling you until there's no need for it any longer."

"And when will that be?"

"When Bull Bart has quit making tracks on top of this earth."

John laughed, as he always did at Nels' blood-thirsty predictions, but he realised that what the little man had said was quite true. Bart was his implacable enemy. Bull Bart, bully of the Big Woods, could be depended upon to do but one thing to the man who had made the woods laugh at him as John had, and that was to kill him.

John did not take the time to consider fully the significance of this situation. He was so obsessed with his fight to succeed in the position in which his uncle's disability had placed him, that everything else was of secondary importance. To put the job through, to make the King Pines into saw-logs, and to get the logs behind the Peabody booms as Peabody timber, that was the purpose of his existence for the present.

After that—well, after that there were several things to be considered, things which he scarcely dared think of lest they loosen his grip and make him less able to fight his fight. At times his thoughts ran back to Peabody Point, to the house on the hill, and to Belle. But he put these thoughts away and threw himself like a wild man into his work.

CHAPTER XXX

CURLY JOE STRIKES

AN ugly story drifted down from the Falls one day. Bart, in a drunken fury, had killed a man. To let the thing blow over he had deserted the Falls for Spirit Lake. John gave a sigh of relief when he heard the story. With Bart away the gang probably would lie quiet.

And then Bart, through Curly Joe, began to play his cards.

Ever since word had come from the Falls that Curly Joe's arm was well and that he had been seen hunting, Nels had made it his special care to keep close to John as he made his rounds of the crew. Each morning he arose before the rest of the camp was awake and at daylight he made a half-mile circle around camp, his sharp eyes searching the snow for tracks that might betray the presence of an enemy lurking within striking distance.

When John started out to inspect his line of sawyers, Nels went ahead, keeping himself out of sight, but never relaxing his vigilance until John had gone back to camp. While John was busy in camp, Nels devoted himself to his meat-hunting. There was no opportunity for Curly Joe to prove his marksmanship on John without first shooting it out with Nels.

One evening Gavin, who, with his arm in a sling now, was driving the tote-team, came staggering through an incipient blizzard into camp on foot two hours after he was due with his load. He was all but frozen helpless,

and it took heat and rubbing and much black coffee before he was able to speak.

"They shot th' team on me!" were his first words. "One shot—*bang!* an' they both lay dead in their tracks."

When he became coherent he told his story.

"It was about four miles down—down below the forks where the branch goes up to th' Falls. It hadn't started storming then. I was givin' 'em a bit av a rist to git their wind on top of the hill, the team standin' with their heads down and me fillin' me poipe. There wasn't a soul in soight, the saints help me. *Bang!* From th' roight av th' road it came far off, a roifle, and th' nigh horse goes down in his tracks, an' th' off wan rares up and cries and falls on top of him. Not a soul in soight, th' saints help me.

"I couldn't b'lave it! I got down an' looked. They're both av them shot through the necks clean as a whistle and both av them too dead to skin. I run into the woods toward where the shot come from—I did so. I was ravin'! Look here—" he thrust out his heavy woollen cap and showed the high peak of it neatly bored by a bullet—"I stopped then. Suppose I'd had th' cap pulled low on me head? 'Tis a curse on me, I'm thinkin'; first poor Donovan, an' now th' poor horses. An' I never even see th' devil that did it."

"No need to see him," said Nels. "That's Curly Joe's work. The hound, to go shooting horses!"

The men, especially the teamsters, growled and cursed. Like all men who work with horses, they had an instinctive hatred for the man who wantonly maims or kills one. The tote-team was a pair of big, sleek bays, steady, gentle horses that had been in the Company stables for many years.

"Well, boy, what do you say about it now?" asked Nels, coming close to John. "Curly Joe's got working.

What are we going to do—stand still and take what he hands us?"

"We're going after that load," said John quietly. "Lavin, hook a team heavy enough to haul the tote-sleigh on to the light sleighs. Boys, who wants to take a ride in the storm?"

A score of them clamoured for the chance. John selected three besides Nels, and in a few minutes the sleigh started from camp, every man bearing his rifle.

"Not that there'll be any chance to use 'em," said Nels. "Curly Joe won't be hanging around that load. He was back to the Falls as fast as he could leg it after the shooting. That's where we ought to be going."

His prediction proved correct. The sleigh stood as Gavin had left it. The horses lay in a tangle on the pole, for Gavin with his broken arm had not been able to take the harness off them. By the light of lanterns the men searched the falling snow for tracks. No one had approached the load, not even the wolves had yet overcome their fears sufficiently to fall upon the feast of horse-flesh that lay waiting for them.

John directed the removal of the stiff, frozen bodies from before the sleigh, and when the new team was hooked on ordered the drive back to camp to begin at once. The men were disappointed. They had hoped that the Boss was going to hold somebody to account for the destruction of the team, and in spite of the blizzard they started back grudgingly.

"First thing we know they'll be coming down and shooting horses in the stable for us," complained the teamster. "I suppose we'd say 'thank you' if they did. We ought to——"

"You ought to keep your head shut," snapped John. "I'll attend to what ought to be done about this."

While the men were outwardly raging he was outwardly calm. The sight of the dead horses had driven

him into a fury fiercer than that of any teamster in the crew, but only in that his black brows were drawn tightly together and his lips a thin, straight line might his anger be read. The men were outraged at the spectacle of faithful dumb workfellows and friends slain in their helplessness and trust in man; but John held himself in and was deadly calm because he saw that the time for settling his fight with Bart and his gang had come.

It had to be done. This thing had to be stopped and revenged. He was not particularly moved at the brutality of horse-killing at that time. Later on that came. For the present he was so wrapped up in running the job that he considered only one phase of the situation: if Curly Joe took to shooting horses he would cripple the camp within a week—if he wasn't stopped.

The road back to camp lay straight against the blizzard. The snow—small, frozen pellets—was driven like bird-shot against their faces. The wind, howling, whining, shrieking exultantly, strove to force itself through their mackinaws, to reach their bare bodies, to lay its icy hand upon their hearts. About them the wind grappled with the trees and sought to throw them to the ground. Dead branches were wrenched off with a crack and went whistling through the dark night, missiles of the cruel storm. But like giants, confident of their strength, the pines swayed easily, growling their ridicule of the gusts that assailed their trunks.

That was the North! Cruel and relentless, whipping the weak out of existence, permitting only the strong to survive. The old law of the open, wind-swept spaces. John sensed it as he rode, glooming over the problem he faced. The issue was fairly before him. Curly Joe had to be stopped; and Curly Joe had thrown the gauge: get me or I'll get you. That was plain.

But John was not sufficiently hardened, not sufficiently in tune with the hard creed of the North to contemplate

the taking of human life without a qualm, no matter how just the affair might be. But Curly Joe had to be stopped, else it was for himself to flee from the Woods a failure. And there was a certain reason why he couldn't do that.

CHAPTER XXXI

A SECOND TRIP TO WHISKY FALLS

"NELS," said John quietly, when they had reached camp and the men were taking the load indoors, "come into the office a minute. I see," he went on when they were alone, "that we've got to put an end to this thing or it'll put us out of business. We will have to go after Curly Joe. I won't have any of the men laying off to do it; you and I will be plenty."

"You don't have to mix up in it at all," Nels growled promptly. "Just you stick in camp here and I'll go up and get him to-morrow."

"No," said John, "I don't want it done that way. I just want to stop him, that's all. Understand? If we can get hold of him, you and I, we can drag him down here and keep him locked up until we get a chance to get him to jail on the charge of killing those horses."

Nels shook his head as he listened.

"Boy," he said, "you've got a lot to learn about the woods. Put me out in the timber, and do you think anybody could get near enough to take me, especially if I knew they'd be out looking for me? Well, Curly Joe's 'bout as good a woodsman as I am. 'Get hold of him!' Why, boy, we couldn't get within rifle-shot of Joe without him knowing it."

"Not in the timber," agreed John. "But he probably isn't as watchful up at Whisky Falls."

The old man's eyes drew down to pinpoints. "You mean——"

"To-night, in this storm, they won't be expecting visitors up at the Falls. They'll probably be celebrating on account of Joe getting the tote-team. Two of us, with shot-guns, ought to be able to hold them all up if we took them by surprise. Bart's away. If we can lay hands on Curly Joe we can drag him with us. With him out of the way they won't bother us, not until Bart gets back, at least. And even Bart'll think twice before starting anything new if we get away safely with Joe. What do you say?"

Nels held out his hand.

"That's about the stiffest thing I ever heard tackled in these woods," he said, "but I'm with you, boy."

"All right, then. You round up a couple of pump-guns and some shells. You needn't let any of the boys get wise. Put the guns in the cutter and come back here."

When the camp was asleep, John and Nels went to the stables and quietly harnessed a driver to the cutter. Old Lavin was curious, but John directed him to go back to his bunk and cease worrying, the horse would be back in the stables by daylight next morning.

They drove out of camp slowly and quietly, having taken the bells from the harness, and took the ice-road to the river. At the river they turned north, gave the horse his head and drove pell-mell through the storm for Whisky Falls. They did not speak except in monosyllables.

It was weather in which one held his head low against the storm and kept his mouth closed tightly. A short distance below the Falls they turned the horse into a sheltered angle in the bank, double-blanketed him and tied him securely.

From the bottom of the cutter, where they had been sheltered from the snow by the blankets, Nels drew two repeating shotguns. In the darkness he manipulated them

to reassure himself that they worked smoothly, and that each held one buckshot cartridge in the barrel and five in the magazine.

"All right," he said, handing one of the guns to John, and they started on foot to complete their journey.

When the lights of the evil settlement gleamed before them, like pin-pricks in the darkness of the storm, they stopped and lay flat down in the snow.

"Too far away," said John presently. "We'll go closer."

Crouched and silent they moved forward to the very edge of the clearing in which the settlement stood, and lay down again. They could now make out the separate buildings in spite of the storm. It was a dull night at the Falls. There was no rattle of music, clink of glasses, nor the sound of laughter.

"We picked the right kind of a night," whispered Nels. "Their dogs will all be indoors in this weather."

"We've got to find out which place Curly Joe's in," John whispered. "Are there any windows in the back of those buildings?"

"No."

They lay silent a while.

"Come on," said John; "we'll have to take a chance."

Close to the ground and with their guns ready, they started to cross the open space. They were half-way across when within Wah Song's a hound suddenly gave tongue. The keen scent—or perhaps a sixth sense—of the animal had told him that something alive was approaching.

John and Nels dropped flat in the snow. After a while the door opened at Wah Song's and a man looked out. He stood for a moment silhouetted against the yellow light of the room, and John stiffened to his toes as he recognised the twisted form and murderous countenance of Curly Joe.

"Nah! Nuthun' there," grumbled the man in the doorway. He swore at the dog and then closed the door.

"Well?" whispered Nels.

"We're in luck," said John. "Come on."

They crawled forward almost under the eaves of the building. Then together they arose, threw open the door and leaped in, their two shotguns pointed before them, sweeping the entire room with their wicked black muzzles.

"Hands up!"

"No tricks—hands up!"

John spoke first, Nels' words followed like a grim growl on his command.

There were six people in the room. Behind the bar, to the left, stood a bartender; at the end of the bar, with a big cigar in his mouth, lounged Wah Song; a woman in a red dress stood near him; at one of the faro tables the dealer was rolling a cigarette; at the right of the room, near the stove, stood Curly Joe, and a young Indian squaw sat a yard away. Wah Song, with John's gun squarely on him, and Curly Joe, covered by Nels, thrust their hands up instantly. The others followed suit. Even the stump of Wah Song's right arm went up.

"No tricks," repeated John, as his eyes swept from one to the other. "We haven't come here for trouble. We've come here for Curly Joe. You shot my tote-team to-day and you've got to come with us and stand trial. Don't try any talking," as Joe's evil mouth opened. "We've come to get you. Don't any of you move. Nels, go over and take him. I'll watch the others. Keep your hands up. Go ahead, Nels."

Wah Song's broad face, though his single hand was high above his head, was as expressionless as when on a busy night he sat on his platform, pump-gun at hand, and dominated the crowd.

"You no want me go 'long, too?" he asked lazily.

"I want you to stay right there with your hand up, and——"

The room suddenly roared with a shot as Curly Joe leaped behind the squaw and fired twice between the rungs of the chair at Nels. John saw Nels drop to his knees like a man whose legs are cut off, fired his load of buck-shot into Curly Joe's pistol-hand as it thrust forward for a third shot, pumped in a fresh cartridge as he swung back to cover Wah Song; then something that seemed to weigh a ton struck his left side and threw him to the floor.

He was dazed, but not unconscious; he saw that Wah Song had sprung behind the woman in the red dress and fired. He saw that Chinaman's big face peering from behind the red dress. He tried to cover it, but it drew back out of sight.

A yellow hand with a big revolver in it licked out and fired at him as he rolled and tumbled across the floor toward the woman. He caught the hand that held the revolver.

He jerked Wah Song from behind his shelter, and then a shot-gun roared behind him and Wah Song came tumbling over him like a sack of grain.

"Steady, you other fellows, steady!" It was Nels' voice warning the bartender and faro-dealer.

John heaved Wah Song off and staggered to his feet. He felt deadly sick and saw things as through a fog. Wah Song was lying on his face; Curly Joe's hand was blown off at the wrist; the bartender and the faro-dealer held their hands aloft. All that was quite right.

He looked at Nels. The little man was still on his knees. He struggled in vain to rise, and there was a look of surprise and helplessness on his white face, but he held his shotgun ready, like a hunter, holding the bartender and dealer helpless.

"Hit, boy?"

Nels did not take his eyes from the men he was watching. John picked up his gun. The movement brought a throb of pain from his side.

"Not to count," he said, stepping to Nels' side. "You?"

"Nothing," said Nels. "Hurry out, boy. Run for your life. The whole settlement'll be swarming in here. Run for the cutter!"

"You?"

"All right. Run, boy, run!"

"Can't you get up, Nels? My God! Why don't you get up? You—you're hit in the legs?"

"Get out—get out!" Nels screamed, but he kept his men covered. "I can hear 'em coming. Boy! What you doing? You can't—you're crazy! Get out alone!"

John threw him over his right shoulder. Holding his gun in his left hand, he backed swiftly out of the door.

"You —— fool!" spluttered Nels. "Put me down and run for it. You can't make it this way—here they come!"

Men were running up from the other buildings. John backed slowly away, menacing them with the pump-gun.

"Turn around!" cried Nels. "I can shoot over your shoulder. Run for it before they get us surrounded."

John turned and ran, staggering blindly into the storm. If he could only cross the clearing; if he could only reach the timber! Nels' gun boomed close to his ear. He heard a cry and the sound of splintering glass. Only a few steps more now. Again Nels fired. John reached the shelter of a big pine and stopped, panting, as a flare of shots came from the buildings and bullets thudded into the tree-trunks around them.

"You fool! Put me down! You're crazy, boy, plum crazy!" cried Nels.

He fired two swift shots across the clearing, and, behind the big pine, slipped in fresh cartridges.

"You had a chance alone—you'd have made it. Now they'll get you—they'll head us off."

John fired once at a flash near one end of the settlement, and a second shot full at the door of Wah Song's.

"Now then," he said, when he too had reloaded.

He picked Nels up again and ran farther into the woods, keeping trees between himself and the clearing, as much as possible. The firing from the buildings broke out afresh.

John stopped again, and, shooting from behind trees, he and Nels sprayed the clearing with buckshot. Again he lifted his living burden and again ran forward into the woods.

The shooting from the buildings stopped abruptly. John sought a big tree, deposited Nels safely behind it and leaned weakly against the trunk, gasping for breath. He was sick—wretchedly sick to his stomach.

"You fool!" growled Nels as John vomited violently. "You're hit—you're hit hard, and you wouldn't go away."

John recovered himself presently. His body was throwing off the shock from the bullet and his mind was clearing. He understood that he had been shot in the left side, but he also realised that the wound could not be serious enough to be immediately disabling, else he could not have carried Nels.

"We got to get to the horse," he said doggedly. "We'll be all right when we get to the horse. Which way is he?" he asked, bewildered by the storm.

"Right straight to your left," said Nels. "Now you hoof it alone—as fast as you can run."

Once more John picked him up without a word and started on. The snow beat against his eyes and made the going dangerous. He ran into trees, stumbled over windfalls, stepped into pitch-holes. He stumbled and fell once, and a shriek from Nels told that he had struck on one of his broken bones.

"Put me down; find the horse alone, anyhow," begged Nels; and John stumbled on with him without replying.

"We'll be all right when we find the horse," he said over and over again. "We'll get you patched up quick, then, Nels."

In the darkness he found the river-bank. He located sheltered spots one after the other that seemed to be the one in which they had tied the horse. But there was no sign of horse or cutter there, and he went on.

"Here it is," he said at last, recognizing the spot by a large rock.

He hurried on. In the darkness and storm he could see but a yard or two ahead, so he went toward the tree where the horse should have been tied, groping forward with his hand.

He found the tree. Soon his hand found the rope wound double about the trunk. Then he found what was left of the hitching-rope. A piece, perhaps a foot long, was dangling in the wind against the tree.

John placed Nels carefully upon a sheltered rock.

"Nels," he said quietly, "our shooting must have scared him. The horse is gone!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE IRON THAT WAS IN HIM

WITH the snow-wind howling about them, the two looked at each other without outcry, without speaking for several seconds.

"Well, you see you'll have to leave me anyhow, now," said Nels quietly. "Follow the tracks; the horse'll go home the shortest way there is. Don't waste any time; go ahead. I'll have to stay here—till the boys come after me. So long, boy."

He had given his hand as a pledge in the office that night, but he made no sign of offering it now. A curt nod and "so long"; that was to be his parting. John sat down beside him to get out of the wind.

"Don't talk like a —— fool," he said gruffly. "Where are you hit—are you bleeding badly?"

"No," growled Nels. "No bleeding. The bones of both legs—below the knees—they'll be down here looking for us as soon as they get their nerve back," warned Nels. "You're young, boy; you've got a lot of life before you. Don't be a fool any longer. You can't carry me any farther, and you've got to get yourself fixed up——"

"Oh, shut up!" growled John. He was thinking. "I've got it," he said, as if speaking more to himself than to Nels. "Nels, give me your big skinning-knife."

The knife was handed over without a word. John prowled the river bank until he found a young tamarack about an inch and a half in diameter. The heavy blade made short work of hacking the sapling down and he

soon returned to Nels, dragging the heavily branched tree behind him.

"I can't carry you, but I can pull you, I guess," he said, as he picked Nels up and laid him carefully on the boughs. "You showed this trick yourself, when you showed me how to pull a deer into camp without a sleigh. As long as you're not bleeding, we'll make it. Will you ride there all right? Just lie right still and we'll be all right."

He was working rapidly as he talked. He took the piece of rope from the tree and spliced it to his heavy belt. They made a rope more than six feet long. One end he tied securely to the butt end of the tamarack, the other he threw over his shoulder.

"All right," he said, and started to drag the little tree and its load down the river toward camp.

His left side was stiffening. From the hip to the armpit there was a numbness over which he had no control. It was not cold; he had not begun to freeze yet.

He was feverish. He opened his mouth and let the icy snow flakes blow in. He scooped up handfuls of snow as he went and filled his mouth. The stuff froze his tongue for an instant, melted, and left him with a feverish thirst. His head began to whirl a bit, but he pushed on.

The little tree and its little burden pulled strangely heavy. He couldn't understand. The yielding branches made practically a natural sleigh. It ought to slide easily. He had hauled a two-hundred-pound buck that way at Main Camp. Nels didn't weigh much over a hundred. Perhaps the storm was making the slipping bad. Well, he would have to make the best of it, and he pushed on.

It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been for the storm. He had never known of a blizzard like that before. One minute it blew icy cold and made a fellow feel chilled and dead all over; the next it was full of fire and made a fellow so warm that he wanted to tear

off his mackinaw and gasp for breath. He couldn't do that, however. It wouldn't be right. He was supposed to be doing something that he needed his mackinaw for. What was he supposed to be doing, anyhow? He stopped to think it over.

"Give it up, boy. You go ahead. I'll be all right. You make for camp as quick as you can."

The sound of Nels' voice cleared John's senses as wind clears a fog.

"You all right, Nels? Ain't getting numb, are you? All right. We'll make it easy."

He went on again, head down, bending against the rope over his shoulder.

The rope began to irritate him. It was fighting him, trying to stop him, even trying to pull him backward. Queer how a little rope could pull so. But it couldn't beat him. No, sir! He'd fight it to a finish. He'd fight it forever. All he had to do was to keep putting one foot forward all the time. Yes, the rope was pulling back so hard that he'd have to give up walking the way he had been. His left leg wasn't playing fair. It was getting numb, like his left side, and it wouldn't step out as it ought to. Well, his right leg was all right. He could hunch along sideways, right leg first, right leg first, dragging that numbed left one.

"For God's sake, boy! Stop!"

Who was that talking? Oh, yes, that was Nels. Of course. What was he whimpering about now?

"What are you whimpering about now?" said John, as if prompted to speak by something deep within him. He was all right. "I'm all right."

Yes, he would fight that rope to a finish. It was getting stronger all the time, but it couldn't beat him. He'd keep pulling forever. Forever. That was it. There was no end to this; he couldn't remember that it had had a beginning. Right foot forward, right foot forward,

dragging his left leg, hunching along, through the storm and the darkness, forever and ever, amen!

"Boy, boy! Are you blind? There's the roll-ways—to your right there—swing to your right!"

Swing to his right. All right. The rope was talking. It was his Boss. It could make him swing to the right, but it couldn't make him stop pulling. No, sir; not even if it did make him swing to the right and go up the steep bank.

"The ice-road—right there, boy, to your left. Can't you see?"

To his left this time. All right. He had to obey. He couldn't think for himself—or talk—or see. All right. But it couldn't make him stop! No, sir, not even if it did send him up the slippery ice-road, not even—he slipped and fell flat on his face on the grey ice of the logging-road, and that was the last that he remembered of that night.

But he did not stop. He rose up, moving weakly, and leaned against the rope. Something drove him on even after his consciousness was gone. He hunched forward inch by inch as he had been going for the last mile. His body moved without any directing intelligence. Moved on and on while Nels, helpless on the tamarack, whimpered and wept. And still on and on. And so at last, just as the day was breaking, he came hunching into the camp clearing, dragging his load, and stumbled and fell at the feet of his men as they were coming out from breakfast.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FINISH OF WHISKY FALLS

IT was the sting of warm water on his side that finally aroused him. He did not open his eyes, but as if in a nightmare he sensed that he at last was in a warm place, that men were standing around him and that one of them was washing his numb left side with warm water. The water pricked like a thousand needles. He raised his arm in pain and his hand fell heavily on the floor.

"He's coming to," said a voice. "Now bring the blankets here if you've got 'em good and warm. That's the stuff. Now we'll roll him up in 'em, tight and warm."

John had the sensation of being lifted, of being laid down again, and of having something warm wrapped around him. He struggled with the terrible weariness and weakness that held him so helpless, and managed to move his lips.

"Nels?" he murmured faintly.

"Nels is all right, Boss. Don't worry; Nels is all right. So are you. We're going to take you both down to the Point to the doctor. You'll be all right, Boss."

It was some time before the meaning of this seeped through the pall of weariness into his mind. He felt himself lifted again. He was being carried. He felt the cold outdoor air on his face, caught the jingle of sleighbells, and then he understood. They were taking him away from camp; they were going to take him to the Point. He opened his eyes. Norby's beard was directly above him. Norby was lifting him into the sleigh. John suddenly raised his head.

"Hold on! Where going?" His voice was stronger.

"We're going to take you and Nels down to the Point—to the doctor," said Norby. "You'll be——"

"No. I don't go there."

"That's all right, Boss." They were humouring him. "You'll be all right——"

"—— you!" shrieked John, struggling in Norby's arms. "Can't you see I'm all right? Take me to my bunk. Take Nels down to the doctor. I stay here. Come on; don't you hear me?"

They paused.

"You got to——"

"Take—me—to—my—bunk." He spoke slowly. "I am all right. I know what I'm doing. Go ahead with Nels. After he treats Nels bring the doctor up here. Do you get that through your thick heads? Or do I have to——"

He struggled to throw himself on the ground, but they held him firmly.

"No, no! That's all right, Boss. But—but——"

"Who's Boss here?"

There was no need for them to reply. He was Boss, even though he was helpless in a roll of blankets.

"Then do as I've told you," he said, leaning back. "And hurry down with Nels. Right away!"

He closed his eyes again. He felt that they were carrying him toward his bunk.

"Nothing else to do." He heard them mumbling to each other. "Drive like ——, then, Lavin, and bring the doctor back as soon as you can."

He heard Lavin drive furiously away. He felt warm air again on his face, heard a door slam behind him, and then he resigned himself blissfully to repose in his bunk where the men had placed him.

A terrible thirst awoke him at intervals during the day. He groaned and raised his hand, and always Dugan was

there, Dugan and his red head, a pale, worrying Dugan who occasionally found it necessary to wipe a troublesome moisture from his eyes, lest some one come in and fancy he had been crying.

"Here y'are, Boss—water—right here."

John did not open his eyes. He allowed Dugan to raise his head without making any effort to aid him, and when the water was held to his mouth he drank as if his life depended upon it. The water was good, and it was cold, but it could not quench the fire that was burning within him.

The day passed. It grew dark in the room and a lamp was lighted. John felt that he was being moved again. Something was being done to his side. Why couldn't they leave his side alone? Wasn't it enough that a fellow had a hole in it?

"That's 'nough, Dugan," he muttered. "Stop it."

"We'll be through in just a few seconds, Mr. Peabody. Just lie still a few seconds longer, please."

That wasn't Dugan's voice. John opened his eyes.

"Oh! H'llo, doc'," he mumbled, as he recognised Dr. Dean's white beard. "How's Nels' legs?"

"Nels is doing very nicely." Dr. Dean certainly had a good voice for a doctor; made you feel that everything was all right. "Now, if you will just let us turn you a little farther, Mr. Peabody—there, that's it. Now, just sip this—that's it."

The draft that the doctor held up to him wasn't cold. Yet, somehow, it seemed to reach and quench the fire burning within him. Also it made him feel so peaceful, so comfortable, so sleepy. The doctor continued to speak softly, but John did not hear. He was enjoying the first moment of perfect comfort since Wah Song's bullet had torn his side. He was peacefully and quietly asleep.

Daylight, broad daylight when he awoke. The low-slanting Winter sun was in his eyes, and the camp was

quiet. He started to rise, but a twinge in his side warned him and he lay back on the pillow. He remembered what had happened.

"Dugan!" he called.

"Right here, Boss." Dugan was sitting at the head of the bunk, and he leaped eagerly to John's side.

"What time is it?"

"Just after dinner, Boss; the crew just went back to work."

"Huh! Have I slept that long? I suppose the job's all shots to pieces by this time. The crew all working?"

"You bet they are, Boss."

"Heard anything from Nels?"

"Only what the doctor said last night. You heard that. Gee, Boss!" Dugan was breathless with awe. "That certainly was logging some—you snaking him into that camp through that storm with a big hole like that in your side. You certainly are——"

"Shut up!" growled John. "Have you heard anything from the Falls?"

Dugan's freckled face actually grew serious for an instant.

"Yes-es, Boss, we heard something from the Falls," he said haltingly.

"Have they been bothering any more?"

Dugan did not speak at once.

"Bothering? No; you bet they ain't been bothering," he said slowly. "They're through bothering, those Whisky Falls fellows are. They won't hold up any logging in this camp, not any more. You see—you see, Boss, there ain't no Whisky Falls left!"

"Wha-a-at!"

Dugan ducked his red head rapidly.

"Not anything left up there—not anything but burned timbers, and a lot of broken glass laying 'round in the snow," continued Dugan.

"You see, Boss—you see, yesterday afternoon, before the doc' come, you—you had kind of a fainting spell, and the boys they—they thought it was all off with you. Nels had told all about what happened up there, so Norby he says to Brackett: 'They're still up to the Falls, the gang that did this,' he says. Brackett he says: 'All right, Norby,' and the two of them go to the bunk-house and load a couple pump-guns.

"Then Norby says to the crew: 'The gang up at Whisky Falls has put the Boss out of business,' and then him and Brackett hike out together without saying anything more. Then the boys knew what he meant and they jumped and got hold of all the guns in camp, and some who couldn't get guns took axes, and Burns, the big slob, took my rifle away from me because he didn't have any himself, and I had to take an ax, too. There was about fifty of us went; the rest stayed here in camp.

"Norby and Brackett they was in the lead when we got to the Falls, and the dogs began to bark and they opened the doors and looked out and saw us. So Brackett and Norby ran to Wah Song's and the rest ran to the other places—fifty of us they was—and we come across the clearing and hit the doors about the same time.

"Norby tried to make me go back, but I smashed in the door of Wah Song's just the same. Wah Song, he was dead already, you know; Nels had put him out of business, and they had him up on that platform where he used to sit. Curly Joe he tried to shoot Brackett with his left hand, and Brackett laid him out with one kick.

"Norby must of went kind of crazy when the two bartenders pulled their guns, because he didn't think of shooting but just took his gun by the barrel in one hand and went over the bar and smashed 'em cold, both of 'em. He got hit three times, Norby did, just winged,

but his right arm wasn't touched and he's pulling saw all right to-day. Brackett got hit in the foot when he was choking the faro-dealer, and then the other boys come rushing in and we had 'em licked.

"I didn't see what happened, because Norby wouldn't let me come when they rushed Curly Joe out in the woods, but pretty soon they come back without him. Then they went to the stable and hooked up the two teams they found there and made them all get into the sleighs, the women and men, about a dozen there was altogether, and they started 'em off to the edge of the clearing and stopped.

"By that time the boys had got together all the kerosene they could find and sprinkled it all over the buildings. There was about ten barrels of alky and whisky in the back of Wah Song's, and they smashed them up and let the stuff run on the floor. Wah Song was laying up on the platform all the time.

"There was a wind from the west, so Norby goes to that end of the buildings where they'd broke up a barrel of kerosene over a lot of kindling wood, and he sings out: 'Everybody out?' 'Let 'er go!' says the boys, and Norby touched 'er off.

"Gee, but she did burn quick! I never see anything like it. She just seemed to blow right up. Brackett waited until the buildings was all going, then he says to the gang in the sleighs: 'You can go now. Take a good look at that fire so you'll know better'n to come back. An' tell Bart what happened to Curly Joe and Wah Song, and that he'll get the same if he ever shows his face around our camp. Giddap; get out of here,' he says.

"Then they drove away on the jump and they didn't say a word. We had to get back into the timber on account of the heat, but we waited until the roofs fell in and the walls went, and there wasn't anything left of the Falls but piles of red logs. And then when we got

back to camp the doc' was here and he says you were going to be all right. But we'd done the job then. There won't be any more bothering from Whisky Falls, Boss. We put them out of business, because we thought they'd done the same by you."

CHAPTER XXXIV

TO THE END OF THE JOB

FOR a mild old gentleman, Dr. Dean was in a bad temper when, two days later, he returned to camp to inspect his patient and found him, with a crutch under his left shoulder, bossing the crew on the roll-ways.

"If you were only a lumber-jack, without intelligence enough to appreciate the importance of absolute rest after what you have gone through, Mr. Peabody," said the doctor, "I would have nothing to say. I presumed that when I left orders for you to remain absolutely quiet on your back until I saw you again you would have sense enough to obey. If I hadn't, I certainly would have had you strapped down.

"Rest, man, rest! You drew on your vitality till the bank was empty on that trip that night. Your nerves are dead; you're as thin as a rail. You ought to be put in an asylum for insisting on remaining in camp. Go back to your bunk and rest; I insist upon it."

John laughed nervously.

"Rest—rest?" he exclaimed. "Why, doctor, the hardest work I ever did in my life was to lie in there for a whole day without being able to see how the job was going. Rest? There's no such thing on the programme for me until this job is on the ice."

"You'll put yourself in bed, maybe cripple yourself, if you stay out here."

"I'd go out of my head if I didn't get out."

"Nonsense! You're not so all-important that you can't

lay up a week. The job would run without you for that long."

"Maybe it isn't important for the job that I'm out here, but I know that it is important for me," replied John. "Don't take it to heart, doctor. I appreciate what you've done, and I don't mean any disrespect to you by refusing to obey your orders. This thing is more important to me than you imagine. I've got to keep on my legs and see it through. Now, that's settled. Now, how's Nels?"

The doctor winced a little.

"He is safely on the road to recovery," he said, "minus his left leg from just above the ankle. Don't take it like that," he continued sternly as John groaned out a curse. "You are both very, very lucky to be alive at all. Outside of your luck in getting to camp with Nels—which I don't understand any man's doing in that condition—luck was with you both in the way you were hit. If the arteries——"

"Please, doc', let the details go," interrupted John. "I'll take your word for it. But Nels' leg——"

"The ankle-joint was smashed to splinters—.44-caliber bullet smack through it."

"I suppose he can be fixed up with an artificial affair, can't he?" said John after a thoughtful pause. "Poor old Nels! Yes; we've got to try to fix him up; he'd die if he couldn't get out hunting. How is Uncle John?"

"Exactly as when you last saw him," said the doctor with a shrug of his shoulders. "He is living through Belle. It is lucky for Wolf John that she has plenty of life to give. Take her away and *poof*—out goes his lamp! She has Nels on her hands, too, now. We didn't tell Wolf John about this, naturally. Nels has told Belle all about how you saved him, and——"

"The old fool!" growled John. "Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? Darn a man who has to go talking just because he happens to be on his back."

"And Belle told me to ask you when you would be down to the Point," concluded Dr. Dean.

John's face grew set. He looked away as he said:

"I'll be down to the Point when the King Pines are all saw-logs, and the drive is down behind the booms. Not until."

Dr. Dean whistled in surprise.

"Not till the drive is down, Mr. Peabody? That will be well into the Spring."

"Well into the Spring," agreed John.

"And you figure on staying in the bush until then?"

"Yes."

The doctor shook his head.

"I don't know your reasons, of course, Mr. Peabody, but by George, if I was a young man—well, you wouldn't catch me wasting quite that much time away from Peabody Point, Not unless there was something down there that had me pretty well scared out."

"You've said it, doctor," said John with a hard laugh. "There's something down there that's got me pretty well scared out."

"What? You——"

"Yep. I'm afraid—just plain afraid—to go back to Peabody Point until I've got this job licked and bring it down the river with me."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE ICE GOES OUT

FOR the rest of the Winter and into the Spring, John continued to fight the job, without let-up or serious hindrance. For weeks he limped about on a crutch, while his wounded side healed and the half-paralysed muscles came back to life.

It was weeks before he was himself again, weeks before the keen, healing air of the woods gave him back the store of energy which he had ravished so completely on that terrible, dark night when he fought his own weakness and the howling storm for Nels' life—and won.

The cruel North which had all but killed him, also had saved him. It had whipped him into the condition which made it possible for him to win through that night, and now as, haggard and halting, he stumped to and fro to watch his men, it stung his blood to quickened life and brought the colour back to his cheeks and the spring to his step.

It was many weeks before he could put his strength to a piece of work, but not from the moment he got on his feet did he once relinquish his grip or let the pace of the camp slacken. He grew grim of face and hard of tongue during these weeks. The steady strain told on him, and, coupled to the experience of that night at the Falls, robbed him for the time being of much of his natural good humour.

He knew it himself; he could see it in the attitude of the men toward him, and he knew the remedy for it.

But he had told the doctor the truth when explaining his reason for staying in camp. He was afraid to go back to Peabody Point before he had proved himself and made the job a success.

As Dugan had predicted, there was no more "bothering from Whisky Falls." The terrible lesson which the Peabody crew had dealt out so soberly had been stern enough even for the bad men of the Falls to take to heart. A few of them, men and women, drove tremblingly over to Spirit Lake to attempt in vain to explain to Bart how their plight was no fault of their own, but the greater part of them weighed the probability of Bart's anger against the value of his protection and betook themselves away, changing their names and seeking places where Bart's rage was hardly likely to reach.

Whisky Falls was done for. So much of the fight had been won, and John and his crew were free to devote themselves entirely to their logging.

Word drifted over from Spirit Lake occasionally concerning Bart. At first it was to the effect that he was continuing his wild dissipation. Later, so the stories told, he had stopped drinking and had taken charge of one of the Lowrey camps in that section. Soon after that he sent out the word that all men were expecting:

"I'll settle with young Peabody when the drive is down. He may bring his job to the booms, but I'll see that he never spends his pay-check, unless he cashes it in ——. I'll run him out of the woods, or I'll put him out of business, and do it right on his own stamping-ground. Tell him that I'll settle with him when the drive is behind the booms."

They told John, and he nodded and said that something of the sort was to be expected, but there wasn't any need standing around, wasting any time because of it. The crew heard it and said about the same thing. It was not to be supposed that Bart would leave the woods where

he had been the big man for so many years, and there was not room enough for him there if John stayed.

No one questioned Bart's courage or absolute confidence in himself. He had proven himself and had been victor in too many desperate affairs for that. As John had put the laugh on him, there could be but one end to the affair, and that was a clash between them when the drive was down and the grudges of the Winter came up for settlement.

The word travelled about the woods, and Nels, on his bed in the doctor's house at Peabody Point, heard and was troubled. As soon as Dr. Dean would permit he arose and rode the tote-sleigh back to the camp. John swore and threatened him, but Nels sat him down quietly and waited for the storm to subside.

"The fight is not over yet, boy," he said when John ceased scolding. "What good would it do to bring the drive down if you couldn't win over Bart afterward? He'd be the winner then in spite of all you've done.

"You owe it to all of us to be ready, and that's my job —to see that you are ready. D'you think you're ready now? *Ptt!* Bart could meet you face to face and pull and shoot before you knew what was happening. D'you think it would be fair to the boys who've stood by you to give him that advantage, and let him win out after all? No, boy, you've got to remember that that devil's a bear with long claws, and you've go to sharpen your claws yourself."

In the end he prevailed upon John to practise with the six-shooter in the few moments when the job did not claim his attention.

"Watch his hands if you meet him," Nels said over and over. "Remember, he's as good with one hand as the other, and quick as a cat. Don't pay any attention to his face—he's got a good poker face. Watch his hands, and the second you see his fingers curl toward his

belt, pull and tear loose from the hip. Hold low. Don't take your eyes above his belt. But, first of all, watch his hands—watch 'em like a cat!"

January and February passed, and still the hard Winter weather continued. The ice-road lay frozen hard; in the woods the snow remained sufficient for easy skidding. The saws bit into the Pines with machine-like regularity, each day's work bringing the line of sawyers nearer the river, while the snow-covered ice of the Brulé disappeared under row after row of logs.

March came, and still the cold weather held on. As the job neared completion the strain upon John grew harder. The camp had become a prison to him; the woods were a mighty stockade which shut him out from all the rest of the world, doomed to a task which seemed to have no ending. The mood of the men corresponded to his.

Some of the younger men, undergoing their first Winter in the woods, gave way under the monotony and strain, drew their time and rushed for Spirit Lake, there to ease themselves of strain and money in mad dissipation.

The older men grew glum and silent. There was no more singing in the bunk-house after supper. Most of the men tumbled into their bunks immediately after the evening meal; those who sat up played poker and quarrelled, laying up more grudges to be settled when the drive was down.

John now began to watch the sky each night before he went to bed.

"It'll thaw before morning," he told himself pessimistically each night; but it didn't.

The sleighing held up into the middle of March, when only a fringe of pines remained along the river, within skidding distance through the mud and slush. One afternoon a stream of sawyers began trickling into camp while

the sun was yet high above the timber. They bore with them saws and axes, and they laughed and joked, as men suddenly released from a strain. Dugan, painfully engaged in composing a letter to his Hulda, ran out of the cook-shack in surprise.

"What's up with you bums?" he queried. "D'you get your time?"

For answer they swung him up from the ground laughingly. They tossed him from one to the other. They jigged, they sparred, they wrestled, they whistled and shouted to vent their feelings.

"Matter, you red-headed shrimp! Everything's the matter. We've hit the river, and this —— —— everlasting old job is done."

Then came another period of weary waiting, when the crew which was to take the drive down the river under Whitey Jack sat around with folded hands and waited for the ice to go out. John stayed with them. The strain had not lessened for him. There was still the task of seeing the drive downstream. It was a short drive and an easy one, it was true; but until it was safely accomplished he could not feel that his success was secure.

Came a morning at last when the bare, moist woods were redolent with awakening life. The sun warmed the men lazily as they emerged from the bunk-house. John, standing in the door of the office, smiled and stretched himself comfortably for the first time in weeks.

"Oh heigh! What a day!" he yawned.

The men were laughing as they went to breakfast. Down in the stables the horses were whinnying restlessly. And in the silence of morning there came from the river a sudden growling rumbling that held every man in camp instantly spellbound. A second rumble and every man let out a yell.

"She's going—she's going out! Hip, hip, hooray! Come on, river-hogs; she's a-going downstream!"

John reached the river bank first of all the crew that raced wildly for a sight of the welcome scene. In the middle of the river a ribbon of swift, black water split the melting, grey ice as far downstream as the eye could see. Along the banks the ice had relinquished its hold. The middle of the stream was filled with stray logs and behind them the great mass of the drive was starting slowly, grumbling loudly as if protesting against being disturbed, and crunching the shattered ice before it.

John stood silent as Whitey Jack and his men swarmed out upon the logs and, with peavies, cant-hooks and pike-poles, worried the brown mass free of tangles and steered it into the way it should go. There was no sense of elation in his breast. The drive was starting; the job was a success. He had proved himself; he had made good. But now, when the time had come for him to return to Peabody Point, he thought of Belle and trembled.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE WAY OF A LASS WITH A LAD

NOR did he join the men in their shouts when, on a bright Monday morning, they stood on the banks of the mill-pond at Peabody Point and looked back upon the millions of feet of timber of the drive lying snugly behind the big booms like ships riding in their slips. Neither did Wolf John's proud hand-clasp nor the look of admiration in the old man's eyes pay for the long, monotonous weeks that he had slaved in camp. Nor even Belle's warm handclasp of comradeship and her quiet:

"Oh, Cousin John! It's fine, fine! But I knew you would do it, I knew you would all the time."

No; that didn't help. For he scanned her eyes carefully and failed to see the look in them with which he had hoped and almost prayed that she would greet him.

And that was what he had fought and slaved for. That was why he had been afraid to go back to Peabody Point before he had won. That night on the snow-covered river when she had said so quietly, "I'm not afraid of Bart; are you?" and that Sunday when, after visiting Gavin, she had said, "Bart would put the job through in spite of everything, and so can you—if you will only believe in yourself," had frightened him. For could a man hope to make a girl look at him with the look in her eyes that he hoped for unless he proved himself, until he believed in himself?

John came down from the house on the hill and went

to the room that had been prepared for him in Dr. Dean's little white house near the dam. For the next two days he was busily engaged paying off the men and straightening out the tangled ends of the Winter's work.

Each evening he went up to the big house to dinner, and each time he scanned Belle's eyes in vain for the look which he craved more than the acclaim of men. Each time as he looked his spirits drooped a little lower. There was admiration, confidence, liking in her eyes. That was all; and John learned bitterly that these were nothing to a man who wanted love.

On the third evening he remained away. The desire to speak to Belle of what was in his heart had become a torture, and the torture increased while he was with her and without the courage to speak.

Late in the evening he sat on the bench beside the doctor's door and brooded over his cowardice. He was alone. Dr. Dean had gone far away to visit a patient. It was warm, so warm that the door was open, and the ticking of the doctor's clock was plainly audible outside. A full Spring moon silvered the world, and the passionate northern Spring, passionate because so short-lived, filled the night with a quickened pulse of life. And so he was sitting when Belle came running down the hill and demanded his reason for not coming up to dinner. He looked at her once and, trembling, looked away.

"Oh, nothing," he said fatuously. "I—just thought I'd stay with the doctor to-night."

There was a moment of silence.

"Uncle John sent me after you, Cousin John," she said softly. "He's having a bad evening and he wants you to talk to."

He rose and followed her without a word. He found his uncle rent with the Spring fret of an outdoor man condemned to inactivity. He talked and talked without paying any attention to what he said. His uncle's glee

and pride in the manner in which one of his own blood had whipped Lowrey did not touch him.

He rose with a sigh of relief when at last Wolf John grew sleepy. With a curt good-night he went out. He did not notice that Belle rose and came after him, and he was startled when she called to him from the porch as he started down the hill.

"What is the matter, Cousin John?" she asked sorrowfully. "Something has gone wrong. I can see it. You look unhappy. Won't you tell me about it?"

"Unhappy?" he said. "Why should I be unhappy?"

"That's why I've been wondering," she said, puzzled. "You've done big things. You've made yourself a big man here. And I'm proud. I was proud all the time you were doing it. Aren't you proud? Aren't you glad? Isn't it better than your old indifference? Why—you're a big man, you've had a brilliant success, and you don't look as if you were in the least bit thrilled over it."

"I'm not."

"Cousin John! How can you——"

"Because what I really want to win is so much greater to me—means so much more to me—is so much more necessary to my happiness—to my life—that the rest of it, all of it—everything means—nothing!"

She shrank back a little, as if instinct told her what was coming.

"Means—nothing?" she repeated.

"Nothing! Nothing at all—compared to what I really want to win."

"What you want to win? What's that?"

"It's you, Belle!"

She stood still, looking straight at him, her eyes widening slowly, as if at first she could not appreciate the significance of his words, as if the surprise were too great to be understood at once.

"Haven't you guessed it, Belle? Haven't you seen it?

Why, you must have seen! What do you think I've stuck and worked in the woods for? Why do you think I've changed—and settled down and become something worth while? To please Uncle John? To make a career for myself in the logging business?

"No, I did it—I've done what I've done because that first afternoon, last Winter, when I met you on the swamp and you showed me the way to Peabody Point I knew that I'd met the woman that I was going to love—the only woman in the world for me—and I wanted to have the right some day to ask you to be my wife. And I couldn't have that right until I'd shown that I was a man. Belle, Belle! Haven't you seen it? I—I haven't wanted to do anything in the world but make you care for me."

"Oh, John!" she moaned, and hid her face upon her hands and sobbed.

The breath seemed to go out of John's body as he realised what her answer was going to be. It was as if his strength suddenly had been drawn from him. His head drooped, but he clenched his teeth and bit back the groan that welled up within him.

"I thought you had seen it, Belle," he said gently. "I thought you understood how I felt toward you. Don't cry; don't be unhappy—please."

She raised her head and looked at him, the tears still dimming her eyes.

"John—Cousin John—I thought—I thought you only liked me—that we were only chums. I never—never thought of anything else. Will you believe that, Cousin John? Will you—please?"

"I'll believe anything you want me to, Belle. Don't cry; don't be unhappy. It's all right."

"We were good friends. I thought that was how you looked at it, too. You were so fine—I never have had a real chum—boy or girl—until you came. It was so fine

to have such a friend. I thought that was all you liked me for, too. I'm so ignorant, Cousin John; I don't know anything about such things. Bart wanted to marry me. He said he—he loved me. That gave me sort of a horror of it. I've never let myself think of anything like that since—Oh, John—Cousin John! Why can't we just be friends!"

"Don't—don't be unhappy."

She looked up sharply at the hopelessness in his voice.

"Cousin John! What—what are you going to do? You're not—going away?"

He looked away, not trusting himself to reply.

"You're not going to leave me—alone?"

"Belle! Isn't there any chance? Haven't you the slightest feeling for me? I'll wait—won't you say there's a chance of your—caring?"

She had dried her tears now and was looking at him calmly.

"We've always been honest with each other, John. I must be honest with you now. If there is any other feeling than friendship for you in my heart, I don't know it."

"Then it isn't there," he said. "You would know it if you cared." He took her hand. "I'm sorry I spoke, Belle. But you mustn't be unhappy over it. Promise me that you won't be—you can promise your chum that, can't you?"

"I'm losing—my chum," she said sadly. "It's all I deserve."

"It's my fault," protested John. "I should have seen that you didn't care for me—that way. Will you promise not to be unhappy?"

"No," she said. "Because I know that you are unhappy. I—I almost feel like lying and saying that I do care for you so that I want to marry you. But I am afraid that I—I can't!"

She saw the struggle he was undergoing and flung out her hands compassionately.

"Oh, John, how wrong I've been. How blind—how blind!"

John tried to speak. Yet he knew that there was nothing left to say. Each understood more than their words had told.

"We'll still be friends," he said, holding her hands. The hopelessness in his tone made the words a mockery. "Good night, Belle."

He tore himself away and plunged down the hill, while she stood staring after him with wondering eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVII

MAN TO MAN

JOHN went straight to his room at the doctor's. Without lighting the lamp or undressing he flung himself on the bed. Through the open window came the sound of a girl's laughter; somebody was rowing across the pond. The innocent sound struck John's ears like a twinge of torture. He leaped up and closed the window. When he lay down now the room was quiet; he was alone as he wished to be.

Well, he had failed after all. The structure which he had been building was nothing but a castle of dreams; and now there was nothing left of it; it was gone, vanished—it had not even had a foundation! He had felt, foolishly, that there in the Big Woods, away from the caged and barbered civilisation in which he had been a failure, he had found himself. That was where he belonged; he had been able to do things there, even to make men accept him as their leader. He knew why now.

It hadn't been because he fitted in there. Not because the stern, stimulating outdoors had brought out the best that was in him. It had been because Belle had been a prize to win that he had been capable of things far beyond his normal powers. Well, it was over now. A man had to take these things as best he could. Of course he would have to go away. He sprang up, the torture of his thoughts driving him into a fever which made the little room unendurable.

Outside, in the open space before the mill, the moonlight was unendurable. It reflected from the pond and made all things stand out little less revealed than in the light of day.

John pulled his hat down over his eyes and plunged away from the settlement into the timber. It was darker there, at least. There was no silly girl's laughter to trouble one's ears. He began to walk feverishly, caring not at all for trails, or for where he was going, merely seeking by motion to ease the anguish that was gnawing at his heart.

Daylight found him still walking, and the anguish was not in the least eased. He was calmer now, however, and he returned leisurely to the settlement. Sleep came at last when he again threw himself on his bed. He was awakened by a knock on the door and springing up saw that the sun was high and he had slept well into the forenoon.

"Come in," he said, and Nels entered the room.

"Hello, Nels," said John carelessly, then he caught a glimpse of Nels' serious expression and paused.

Nels shut the door, seated himself slowly, and sat with his hands folded between his knees, staring at the floor.

"Well, what is it?" asked John.

Nels looked up sideways, scratched his chin and looked again at the floor.

"Bart's in town," he said quietly.

"What?"

"Came in this morning," Nels nodded. "All alone. And he says he's going to stay as long as he pleases."

John had recovered from his surprise at the news.

"Well, what of it?" he said indifferently.

Nels' eyes came slowly from the floor to John's face.

"Will you give us the word to run him out of town?"

He was eyeing John in a way that the latter could not quite understand.

"Just give us the word," continued Nels. "There's half a dozen of us ready to put him out of business. If you want us to do it, we'll handle him, and you needn't have a thing to do with it—not till it's all over."

Then a glimmering of understanding came to John. He seated himself on the bed and spoke seriously.

"You say Bart came to town this morning?"

"Yes. Came alone." Nels shook his head. "There's the bones of a man in that devil. That's a pretty nervy thing to do—knowing there's half a dozen of us here aching to take the job off your hands."

"Off my hands, eh? Then—what's he after?"

"You," said Nels simply. Then he added, "He says he's come to run you out of the Woods for good."

A cold grin slowly distorted John's face. If Bart only knew how well such an affair appealed to him since last night! Here was one piece of luck, at least. Nothing to lose, no reason to worry about how the affair ended, and Bart, above all men, as the object for the fury against Fate that was raging within him.

"Where is he now?" asked John.

Nels looked him over; he noted the light of boy-recklessness in John's eyes, the absolute disregard for consequences in his bitter smile. Nels bit off a chew nervously.

"Boss, you know you don't have to mix in this at all. It's all darn nonsense, you being mixed up in a row with a devil like Bart, now. Yessir. You just give us leave—give me leave—it'll be over in ten minutes, and you won't be running a single chance—won't need to even know about it till it's over."

John understood. Nels couldn't help making that speech. He meant it, too. He—or any one, or all of the men from camp—were perfectly willing to take the job off his hands. They gave him that chance. It was their way. They were his loyal friends.

But John had learned too well the rule of life in the Woods not to comprehend the deeper feeling that lay beneath Nels' offer. Every man must keep himself, by such strength of arm and heart as has been given him, against Nature and against Men. And he who cannot, he who must fall back on his friends, is labelled poor and unfit. Yes; the boys were perfectly willing—perhaps even anxious—to take the job off his hands, but they knew that the thing couldn't be done that way.

Bart had drawn his steel. He had played the part of a man, walking boldly and alone into the enemy's camp, knowing that the men, being what they were, would keep hands off. He had trusted them to play the part of men as it is played in the woods; it would be hard for them to do anything else.

"Where is he now?" repeated John.

He was looking into the little mirror on the wall, rubbing his chin. It was scandalous the way his beard grew out in a couple of days. As Nels talked, John drew forth shaving articles and began quietly to strop his razor.

"You know it's darn nonsense——" began Nels again.

John paused, half of his face lathered, and gave Nels a look that made him silent.

"We've had enough of that baby talk," said John. "Answer my question."

"He's down in the office now. He says he's going to wait there until you show up."

John finished shaving and looked at his watch. It was a quarter past nine.

"How does that compare with your time?" he asked. Nels' watch showed the same minute. "All right. You can go down and tell Bart that I'll leave this house and start walking toward the office at nine-thirty sharp. You tell him to leave the office and start this way at the same time."

Nels opened his mouth, but John's eyes made him remain silent. He rose and silently inspected the six-shooter that hung on a chair, throwing out the cartridges, examining them one by one, snapping the trigger six times rapidly, and carefully reloading. Then he went out without speaking or looking at John.

John dressed with great care. He put on a pair of new trousers and a new blue flannel shirt. He tied a bow tie carefully; it was a long while since he had tied one and it took some time. He looked in the mirror. His face, fresh from the shave, was boyish and ruddy. His apparel was neat and new. Satisfied, he turned away and took the revolver and thrust it into its accustomed place, inside the trousers-band on the left-hand side. It made a bulge in the new trousers, and he loosened his belt.

The watch showed that he had three minutes before the half hour. He sat down at the table to write a note to his father. With the pencil in his hand he gave it up, however. There was nothing to say; his father would get the news soon enough. He wished for Belle's sake that Bart hadn't picked Peabody Point as the place. Spirit Lake—any place far away—would have been better. Still, it didn't make any difference; nothing made any difference.

The watch showed nine-thirty and he sprang up, opened the door, and stepped out into the bright sunlight outdoors. From the doctor's little house the river road ran straight and unobstructed to the office, plainly visible the distance of two city squares away.

John looked straight toward the office door as he stepped out; he was surprised at not seeing Bart. He started forward. A breeze came rippling over the mill-pond, bringing with it the odour of budding tamaracks and pines, of violets and moss, in the shaded forest beyond. The sunlight made his eyes blink.

It was a perfect Spring day. A fillip of breeze raised his hat. He set it more firmly on his head. Then he saw Bart.

Bart was standing idly on the office steps. Even at that distance John could see the sneer on his face. He noted that Bart, too, was cleanly shaven and carefully dressed. He went on slowly, doggedly keeping his eyes on the man before him.

Bart lounged idly forward to meet him. His hands were hanging at his side, as were John's. As they approached one another all things in this world seemed to cease to exist for John except those hands. Watch those hands—he can use either of them—watch those hands!

They were within easy range now. John did not see where he was placing his feet. There was wet sawdust in the street. He was not conscious that he slipped, he did not hear the groan that went up from his friends as he slipped to one knee.

John only saw Bart's right hand. As it leaped upward toward the belt he drew and fired three times. He felt the wind of something fly past his temple. He could not understand why he was not hit. He stood upright.

Bart was thrashing around in the street, face down. John saw that Bart's gun was lying far away. Men were running toward him. Some walked slowly toward Bart. He looked stupidly at Nels.

"Didn't touch you, did he? All right, aren't you?"

John nodded.

"You were so quick, boy! You hit him before he had his gun up!"

They were carrying Bart away. John stared after them as they disappeared in the store with their burden. A bare-headed boy came out and started to run toward the doctor's. A man's voice checked him.

"No need bothering."

John felt thirsty and licked his lips.

"You're all right, ain't you, boy?" persisted Nels' voice. "Golly, you were quick! He had the start, but you got in the first shot!"

John turned with a look of inquiry toward Nels. His mouth was parched; he felt burning up inside, though outwardly he was cool.

"Is he——" He tried to speak calmly but his voice was hoarse and cracked. "Is he——"

Nels looked away. A man came out of the store where they had taken Bart.

"He hit him with all three shots!" he said loudly to a man across the street. "Bart never knew what hit him!"

A puppy came yipping happily down the street; the breeze swept in, sweet and odourous from the mill-pond.

"We'll take care of everything," Nels was saying. "You had to do it; he tried to pull first."

John turned away. The fog was clearing. He realised that he was still holding the revolver in his hand.

"Here—take this." He forced the weapon into Nels' hands. "I'm going for a walk. If anybody wants me I'll be up in the woods beyond the pond."

He was beginning to feel faint, but he steeled himself and walked steadily into the woods.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHAT THE PINES SAID

IT was over. He had won once more. The enemy who had sought to destroy him had been destroyed. He had not another enemy of that sort left in the world. He had played the man in the ultimate test. His slate was clean.

And now—what did it amount to? What had it brought him? It had not in the least helped him in the way he wished to be—and needed to be—helped. It had not made Belle care for him. He did not feel sorry for Bart. No, Bart was through. Nothing could trouble *him;* there were no aimless, bitter years ahead for him. Sorry for Bart! Why, he could almost envy——

"John! John! Oh, John, my boy! Is it true? Are you safe—are you unhurt?"

He sprang up. Was he dreaming? Was it a hallucination? Or was it really Belle who was running toward him?

"John!" She flung out her hands to him, but he backed away and made no effort to take them.

"Did they tell me the truth, John? Are you unhurt?"

"Yes. I'm all right," he said.

"Oh, thank God!"

Like a tender flower cut down at the root the tall, strong girl sank helplessly on the moss, her hands still outstretched to him.

John stood and stared down at her, a man turned to stone.

"Belle!" he whispered, awe-stricken. "Belle!"

He came closer. Her face was white against the dark moss.

"Belle!" he cried and, stooping, gathered her in his arms and bore her to the river.

He brought water in his hat and laved her brow, muttering her name over and over again. Her eyes opened dully. She saw his face above her. Her eyes brightened and her lips parted in a tiny smile.

"John—John dear," she said, "do you still want me?"

"Belle!" he murmured; and her arms reached up and enfolded his neck.

"You are unhurt, aren't you, John?" she whispered. "You are safe, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes; I'm all right." He lifted her to a sitting position. "You—you——"

"I ran after you; I had to," she said. "Oh, John, John!" She buried her head against his shoulder. "John, I didn't know until now! I didn't know my own feelings! A boy came running up to the house and told me —told me about you and Bart.

"Then I knew—in a flash. It opened my eyes. I knew in an instant—when I heard that—that you were in danger—that you meant more to me than all the rest of the world—that if you were gone—oh, John, I didn't know before! But now I do. I—I've come to you—I had to!"

"You've come to me——" he stammered. "Belle—you mean—you mean——"

He held out his arms hungrily.

"Yes," she whispered as she leaned toward him, and in a moment John Peabody came into the joy that made all his success worth while.

Above them the breeze stirred the pines and Belle looked up.

"Hear that, John?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said. "What are they saying now?"
She snuggled closer to him as she whispered:
"That everything's all right—everything in this world —so long as we've got each other!"

THE END

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